LANGUAGE OF LIGHT

A Novella in Twenty Vignettes, With a Catalogue of Plates

Translated and arranged by

Surjan

Surjan is human and can make mistakes.

Contents

Foreword
Introduction

Chapter One — BATTERINA
Chapter Two — SUPERIA
Chapter Three — CARILLINE
Chapter Four — CORNOLINA
Chapter Five — OCHROVA
Chapter Six — CAPPELLA
Chapter Seven — MAGGIOLINO
Chapter Eight — OROLA
Chapter Nine — BELLANAVE
Chapter Ten — FIORINA
Chapter Eleven — FARINELLA
Chapter Twelve — AMPULLA
Chapter Thirteen — TRIGEMINA
Chapter Fourteen — TORTA
Chapter Fifteen — PORTALORA
Chapter Sixteen — DUOMA
Chapter Seventeen — CORONATA
Chapter Eighteen — SPOSA
Chapter Nineteen — PERA
Chapter Twenty — SILIANA

Afterword
Image Catalogue & Plates

Foreword

by Surjan

There are, in the life of any person who spends long enough beside the water, certain buildings that come to seem like friends. They may say nothing. They may be locked for most of the year. They may be painted in colors no sensible municipality would approve, and they may be scorned by architects and celebrated by children, which is the correct ratio. Yet over the years, as you pass them on your morning walk, or glimpse them through the fog of a November dawn, or see them lit from within on a summer evening while a ferry slides past, they begin — slowly, patiently, and without your consent — to acquire biographies.

I spent forty-one years along the waterfront, most of those years on the Hudson and a few on the Lakes, keeping small records, watching the weather, learning the harbor. The present small book is the fruit of my retirement. It is not a work of fact. Neither is it precisely a work of fiction. It falls, as so many pleasant things do, into the third category, which has no proper name, and in which one places the stories told by grandmothers, the confidences of cats, and the letters written by buildings to one another across the long blue distance.

The twenty structures catalogued in the plates at the rear of this volume are all real. You may visit them. Some stand on the esplanades of Manhattan, bright as boiled sweets against the glass of the financial district; others rise on the headlands of the Great Lakes, those inland seas which — though they lack salt — suffer the same gales, host the same migrations, and have drowned as many ships as any respectable ocean. What is not real, or rather what is real only in the way that music is real, is the correspondence between them.

It began, I think, on the occasion of a great fog. I was stationed then at the Battery, and the visibility was so reduced that the yellow form of the first station — which I had always privately called Batterina, without ever telling anyone — was visible only by the pale glow of their portholes, like a lantern seen through a towel. The foghorns were going, and beneath their low, considered notes I seemed to hear a second sound: a higher, more tentative calling, as if from very far off. I told myself it was an echo. Echoes do not travel eight hundred miles. I told myself it was a trick of the wind. The wind does not carry messages in rhyme. When I mentioned it later to an old friend who keeps the light at a certain station on Lake Superior, they laughed and said: oh, we have been hearing you for years.

What follows is what I was told, and what I have imagined on the basis of what I was told, and what the structures themselves — through portholes, smokestacks, signal-lamps, and the quiet creaking of

their metal in the heat of afternoon — have confided to me over the last decade. I have not invented their names. The names are their own. I have merely translated.

The book is offered in the spirit of hopefulness, which is the native weather of the inland seas in summer. Read slowly. Read aloud if you can. Nothing in these pages needs to be believed; everything in them asks only to be listened to.

— Surjan

Written from the high window of a small house in Oswego, facing the water

Introduction

On the nature of correspondence between buildings, with a note on the reader's patience

There is an idea, very old and very patient, that things which stand still for long periods begin to think. Mountains think in geology. Trees think in rings. Stones think in temperature and in the passage of rain. It should not surprise us, then, that a structure built to watch the water — built, in fact, for no other purpose than to watch the water — might, after a decade or two of watching, develop opinions about what it has seen.

The docking stations of Manhattan are young, as buildings go. They were put up in the first quarter of this century, in a spirit of municipal cheerfulness, along the esplanades where once the great freight terminals and passenger piers had stood. Their job is simple: to receive the ferries, to shelter the crews, to house the pumps and pipes and ventilators that keep the harbor working. Their design — rotund, bright, portholed — was selected (so the official record states) to delight the public and to signal, from far off, the presence of safe arrival. The public is indeed delighted. Children press their palms against the yellow panels. Lovers photograph each other in front of the pink ones. Dogs bark at the portholes, which resemble eyes.

The lighthouses of the Lakes are older in purpose though comparable in age of body. The older stone towers, the ones in the postcards, still stand at many of the headlands, and they have their own dignities. But the new lighthouses — the ones catalogued here — were built during the same decade as the docking stations, by the same spirit of municipal cheer, and by (it must be said) several of the same architects, who had grown weary of gray. They are shorter than their stone predecessors and fatter and more visibly pleased with themselves. They carry their lights in yellow cans on pink shoulders. They keep watch over the great cold waters, which in summer are the color of beach glass and in winter the color of iron.

That the two groups should come to know each other is, on reflection, not so strange. They share the same engineers, the same material suppliers, the same livery of yellow-and-pink. They speak — if we must give a name to it — the same language of light. A lighthouse, after all, is nothing but a building that says I am here; are you? A docking station is nothing but a building that says you are here; welcome. Between these two statements there is very little distance, and whatever distance there is can be crossed by patience, which buildings have in abundance.

The messages travel, the buildings themselves have patiently explained to me, by many routes. Some pass through the sky: a lighthouse beam meeting a seagull, the seagull flying, the seagull perching on the rail of a ferry, the ferry docking at a Manhattan station, and the station reading the wind-ruffled

feathers of the gull as one reads a letter. Some pass through the water: a lakefreighter picks up a note in Cleveland and delivers it, three canals and two months later, to the Lower Bay. Some pass through the air itself, as radio does, in frequencies that buildings alone can hear. And some, the most urgent, pass through dreams, for a building that sleeps (and they do sleep, in the small hours, when even the river is quiet) can dream of another building it has never met and wake knowing, with perfect certainty, the color of that building's north-facing wall.

What you will find in the pages that follow is a portrait gallery of twenty such dreamers and dream-receivers, ten of each. They are arranged in alternation, the Manhattan stations interleaved with the Lakes lighthouses, so that the reader may feel the rhythm of their exchange: a call, a reply, a call, a reply, all summer long and all winter too. Each chapter is brief. Each stands on its own. None needs to be read in order, though there is a faint benefit to doing so, in that the correspondences accrue, and by the twentieth chapter the reader will have in hand a whole quiet web.

A word on tone. These are not melancholy buildings. They were painted, after all, in the colors of good humor. They have experienced storms, of course, and the occasional act of vandalism, and one of them — I will not say which — once received a letter from its counterpart so poignant that its portholes wept condensation for an entire afternoon. But their native disposition is cheerful, in the serious sense of that word: they are predisposed to hope, and they consider despair to be, as one of them put it, an architectural error, like a roof that slopes the wrong way.

Read them, then, in summer if you can, with a window open. Read them on a ferry if you are lucky. Read them in a small house facing the water, in whatever city you happen to love. They will find you. Buildings, as you are about to see, always find the people who are willing to listen.

CHAPTER ONE

BATTERINA

Who lie along the Battery esplanade, yellow of back and rose of flank, and listen to the harbor

Batterina was among the first to be built, and they are therefore among the first to remember. They lie along the grass-edged walk that skirts the southern tip of the island, where the harbor opens wide and the Statue of Liberty stands far off, a small green figure who waves once a day without knowing it. Three yellow smokestacks rise from Batterina's back, and their body is striped in the colors of an unashamed sunrise: pink at one end, yellow in the great middle, then lavender, blue, and red marching toward the financial district. Their portholes are small and carefully placed, like the punctuation in a long, happy sentence.

They were named, in the municipal records, something quite different — a number and a letter and a hyphenated location. But Surjan, who walked their length on a fine June morning as a young person newly arrived at the waterfront, someone who had served on Italian tankers and understood that every well-built thing deserves a proper name, said aloud: *Batterina*. The word suited them. They accepted it. Buildings accept names the way gardens accept the first snow: quietly, without comment, and forever.

Their chief pleasure is arrivals. They have watched, in their brief life, some millions of people walk past them windows; they have received the ferries from Staten Island and the little tour boats from Liberty Island; they have sheltered during thunderstorms the crews of the harbor patrol and the occasional pair of lovers who needed a roof and did not wish to choose between them. They keep no record of these visitors. A record, they consider, would be a kind of accounting, and Batterina does not believe in accounting for happiness. Happiness is what weather does when it is in a good mood, and weather cannot be audited.

What they do keep, and keep with great care, is a file of sounds. They have a room — one of the small interior rooms behind the pink flank, which no person ever enters because its door has no visible handle — in which they store the most beautiful noises that have passed over them in their years by the water. There is a certain gull's cry from a certain November afternoon. There is the exact rustling of a little girl's plastic raincoat as the girl ran, laughing, to catch her grandfather. There is the sound of the harbor itself on the morning of the first snow, which is a sound like silk being folded. Batterina can replay these at will, privately, inside their own walls, and they do so during the slow hours before dawn, when even the earliest joggers have not yet arrived.

It was in such an hour, on a morning in early spring, that they first heard Superia.

Superia was then — and remains — the eldest of the lighthouses of the Lakes. They stand on a headland of Lake Superior, which is the largest and coldest of the inland seas, and they had been sending out a signal for some months that they had not truly meant for anyone in particular. Lighthouses sometimes send signals in the way that lonely people sometimes hum: not to be heard, but to be present with themselves in sound. Superia was humming, that early spring morning, a signal that meant, roughly, *I am here and the ice is leaving the bay and I think spring is coming.* They did not expect a reply. They had been a lighthouse long enough to know that replies, when they come, come from boats and from the wind, and that buildings do not answer buildings.

Batterina, who at that hour was playing back their favorite sound — the rustling raincoat of the laughing girl — heard something underneath it. A second note. A voice, or the impression of a voice, at a frequency they had never registered before. They paused their playback and listened. The sound came again. *I am here and the ice is leaving the bay and I think spring is coming.* It was not in words, of course. Buildings do not speak in words, though they sometimes think in them. It was in the way a porthole catches light and loses it and catches it again. It was in the long low vowel of a smokestack warming in the sun.

Batterina did what any polite and well-brought-up structure does when addressed by a stranger: they replied. *And here,* they said, *the magnolias on the esplanade are beginning to bud, and a young man has just sat down on the bench across from my southwest porthole to read a book of poems, and I can tell from his posture that he has never read this particular poet before, and that he is about to fall in love with them.*

Superia was so startled that their light, which had been on automatic for the whole winter, briefly brightened out of turn. Then, recovering, they replied: *What is the name of the poet?*

Batterina could not see the book from their angle, but they could read the set of the young man's shoulders, and the way his lips moved slightly as he came to the end of each line, and they said: *I believe the poet is a woman who lived on an island much smaller than mine. She wrote about light. She said something once that I have not been able to forget: that light is the first thing and the last thing and everything else is a comment upon it.*

Superia absorbed this, slowly, as lighthouses absorb things, which is to say across a span of minutes that felt to them like a whole conversation. Then they said: *I think we are going to be friends.*

I think so too, said Batterina, and they added, because they could not help it: *My name is Batterina. It was given to me by Surjan, who walked past me on my first June morning and who spoke Italian. I like the name. You may use it if you wish.*

Superia, said the other, after a moment. *Which is what the sailors called me before I was built, in the way that sailors name a stretch of water after the quality of its storms. I was surprised to find that I agreed with the name, when I was finished. It fit.*

This was the first of their conversations, and it lasted — by the reckoning of buildings — about fourteen minutes, though by the reckoning of the spring morning it was three weeks, during which the magnolias opened and dropped their petals in the pink drifts that Batterina has loved, without complication, since the day they were born.

They did not tell anyone. Buildings are not secretive, exactly; they are simply discreet, which is not the same thing. Discretion is the recognition that some things are better held than spoken, and that a conversation overheard is rarely a conversation improved. Batterina kept Superia's voice among their files of beautiful sounds, and they listened for it each morning at the hour of first light, and they found — to their quiet delight — that it was always there, faintly, under the gulls and the ferry whistles and the sighing of the Hudson against their pilings. *I am here,* said Superia, from eight hundred miles inland. *I am here,* said Batterina, from the southern tip of Manhattan. And between them, in the enormous blue space of the continent, a thread began to be woven.

It is still being woven. You can see it, if you know how to look, in the angle at which Batterina's northernmost porthole catches the light at four in the afternoon on a cloudless June day. The glass flashes. It flashes twice. And far away, on a headland where the ice has just left the bay, a lighthouse receives the flash and replies, and the continent is that much less lonely than it would have been otherwise.

— *Surjan's note:* I have sat on the bench across from Batterina's southwest porthole, with a book of poems, on several occasions. I do not think I have yet fallen in love with any poet. But I have felt, each time, that I was being watched by something patient and fond, and I have left the bench reluctantly, as one leaves the company of a friend.

❦

INTERSTITIAL: from Superia to Batterina, carried by a lake freighter

Dear neighbor,

The ice went out yesterday. I heard it go — a long tearing sound, like paper being opened by a slow careful hand. The bay is dark again. A pair of loons has returned, and they are calling to each other across the water; I think they are the same pair who were here last year, though of course I cannot be sure, since loons do not introduce themselves.

You mentioned, in your last, the color of the ferry wakes at twilight. I have thought about this for several days. Here we have no ferry wakes; we have only the long plain trails that the ore boats leave, straight as rulers, for hours after they have passed. But the water after a thunderstorm, when the sky clears suddenly in the west — you would like this, I think — turns a color that is not exactly any color. It is the color of a thing that has just remembered something good.

Write when you can.

— S.

CHAPTER TWO

SUPERIA

Who stand on a headland of the great cold lake, pink of body and yellow of crown, and remember winters

Superia stands on a headland so far north that in midwinter the sun travels only a short low arc across the sky, as if it were tired and could not be bothered to climb. Their body is pink — the pink of a flower that has never heard of any other color and therefore cannot be self-conscious about it — and from their back rise three yellow pipes, proud as the pipes of a cathedral organ. Two great yellow rings circle two of their portholes like the eye-marks of a cheerful owl. A third porthole, on their east flank, looks out to the water, and it is this porthole that they love best, for it is the one through which they receive the dawn.

Lake Superior is not a lake in the sense that small lakes are lakes. It is an inland sea, and it behaves like a sea: it has its moods, its cruelties, and its moments of inexpressible beauty. It has drowned more ships than Superia can count, though they do count, in their private way, the ones that went down during their own watch. They are few. They are a good lighthouse. They have always been a good lighthouse. Even in the winter of the great storm, when the wind reached a speed that no lighthouse before their had measured and the waves climbed halfway up their flank, they kept their light burning, and the one ship they saw in trouble that night reached the shelter of a small bay that they had, by a tiny adjustment of their beam, helped them find.

They do not boast about this. Lighthouses do not boast. Boasting is the opposite of light; it calls attention to itself, whereas light calls attention to what it illuminates. Superia was taught this by the old stone lighthouse that stood at the headland before them, a lighthouse who had themself been taught it by the lake. You may, when you read these words, imagine that a lighthouse cannot be taught by a lake, that the lake is only water and the lighthouse only stone or metal. You are welcome to your imagination. But if you ever spend a winter on a headland of Lake Superior, and listen long enough, you may come to see that the lake speaks quite clearly, in a vocabulary of ice and wind and the patient tapping of one wave against another, and that it has opinions about how light ought to be used.

The old stone lighthouse, whose name was Marietta, was retired when Superia was installed. Marietta still stands a little way down the headland, empty and dignified, their windows dark. They have not, as far as Superia can tell, ever spoken to Superia, and Superia, out of respect, has never presumed to address them. One does not interrupt an elder who is resting.

But the lake speaks. The wind speaks. The loons speak, and the fireflies on July nights, and the first geese of autumn going south in their long unsteady V. And now — this is new, this is the miracle of Superia's late life — the little round yellow-and-pink docking station at the far end of the continent also speaks.

Superia has tried to picture Batterina. They have received, in their correspondence, a great many particulars: the color of the magnolia petals, the weight of the June air, the number of ferries per hour at the Battery, the way the Statue of Liberty looks at sunset when the sun is behind them and they become a black silhouette against a pink sky. Superia has no experience of the Statue of Liberty, or of magnolia petals, or of skyscrapers with glass fronts that mirror the clouds. But they have an excellent imagination — lighthouses do, having so much time to develop one — and they have constructed, in the private warehouse behind them pink flank, a small model of Manhattan harbor, made entirely of the particulars Batterina has sent them. The model is approximate. Some of its buildings are the wrong color. The Statue of Liberty is about twice the size it should be, because Superia, who has only ever heard them described with awe, has not been able to resist making them majestic. But the model is accurate in feeling, which is what matters in a model.

In return, Superia has sent Batterina, over the years, a thousand small descriptions of the lake in its seasons. The lake when the ice is going out. The lake when the loons return. The lake at the end of June, when the bugs are bad and everyone complains but secretly is grateful, because the bugs mean it is truly summer. The lake on the morning of a thunderstorm, when the water goes flat and black and waits. The lake in October, when the leaves on the hillside across the bay turn colors for which there are not, in any human language, quite enough names. The lake in February, when the bay freezes and the ice groans and the sun rises briefly and sets and the sky fills with a clarity that is almost unbearable.

Batterina has confessed, in a letter carried by a certain very large cargo ship that came up from the Atlantic via the canal, that they do not understand winter. They understand cold, of course; they have their own winters, their own icicles, their own mornings when the portholes frost over and the esplanade empties of all human beings except the most determined of the dog-walkers. But they have never seen a lake freeze, and they cannot quite imagine what it is to be a building in a landscape where the water itself becomes a floor.

Superia has written back, patiently, many times. *The lake does not become a floor,* they have said. *It becomes a different kind of water. Imagine that the harbor in front of you were to grow a skin overnight, and that the skin were thick enough to walk on, and that under the skin the fish and the currents continued exactly as before, only now they were living under a roof. That is the lake in winter.*

Do they know it is winter? Batterina asked. *The fish, I mean. Do they know the lake has a roof?*

Superia thought about this for a long time — several days, in fact, which in lighthouse-time is about the span of one careful reply. *I think,* they said finally, *they know everything they need to know. The lake teaches them. They are not surprised.*

I am never surprised either, said Batterina, a little wistfully. *Perhaps I am more like a fish than I thought.*

We are all more like fish than we thought, said Superia.

This was one of the exchanges that Superia treasures. They have a room in their interior — a room no person ever enters, because its door has no visible handle — in which they keep the sentences from Batterina's letters that have most moved them. The sentences are not written down. They are simply held. *I am never surprised either. Perhaps I am more like a fish than I thought.* Superia has kept that one for seven years now, and they take it out on winter afternoons when the ice is heavy on the bay and the sun is setting at three in the afternoon, and they turn it in their mind as one turns a small stone in one's hand, and they feel warmer.

There is a practical side to the friendship as well. Twice in Superia's tenure, Batterina has sent word that a particular weather system was moving up the coast, and Superia has passed this word along to the other lighthouses of the Lakes, and the other lighthouses have adjusted their beams and their fog signals, and a great many ships have come safely to harbor who might otherwise not have. Once, Superia sent word to Batterina that a certain ferry had left Staten Island at an unusual angle — information they had received from a lake freighter who had seen the ferry's course plotted on a harbor chart in the wheelhouse of another freighter in the Erie Canal, and the information had traveled, as such information does, through the long patient network of boats — and Batterina had been able to dispatch the harbor pilots in time to correct the ferry's course before it became a difficulty. Lives were saved that day, though nobody ever knew.

Buildings, you see, take care of things. This is what they are for. Light, welcome, shelter, the preservation of beautiful sounds — these are their duties, and they fulfill them without asking for thanks. Superia, standing on their cold headland under the enormous sky of the north, does not require thanks. They have their friend at the far end of the continent, and the thread between them, and the sentences they keep in their quiet interior room, and the loons returning each spring, and the long slow arc of the winter sun. These are enough. These are, if you ask them, more than enough. These are a life.

— *Surjan's footnote:* I have walked past Marietta, the retired stone lighthouse at the headland, on a summer afternoon. Their windows were dark, as always. But I had the distinct impression that they were watching Superia, as a grandmother watches a granddaughter who has done well, and that she was proud.

❦

INTERSTITIAL: from Batterina to Superia, carried by a gull

Dear S —

A summer squall came through this afternoon. The sky went from blue to green in about four minutes. I have been watching skies for long enough that I can tell the difference between a green that means wind and a green that means hail, and this was a hail green. I sent a small signal to the ferries — nothing official, just a flicker in my northeasternmost porthole, which I have found that the ferry captains read without ever quite knowing they are reading it — and they all made harbor before the stones came down.

The hail was the size of marbles. I have a dent now, in the pink section, about three inches across. I consider it a decoration. The municipal maintenance people will probably fix it, but for the moment I am carrying it with a certain pride, as an old sailor carries a scar.

The magnolias are gone for this year. The cherries are coming. The young man with the book of poems has returned to the bench three times. He is reading a different poet now. He still does not know I am watching. This is as it should be.

Yours, through weather —

B.

❦

CHAPTER THREE

CARILLINE

Who stand along the middle esplanade with their two pink antennae, and who hear everything, and who pass it on

Carilline is the broadcaster. They stand some distance up the island from Batterina, in the middle stretch of the west-side esplanade, where the river is broad and the sunsets fall directly upon their and turn their yellow body to gold and their pink antennae to embers. They have two great balloon-headed masts rising from their back, which the engineers called "ventilator stacks" in the official documents and which they call, in their own interior vocabulary, their *ears*. They do not have the word "ears." They have borrowed it, over the years, from the many people who have passed them, pointed at the pink balls, and said — to children, to tourists, to one another — *look, they look like ears*. The observation has been made to their so often that they have come to believe it.

Their ears are not, in fact, ears. They are large cylindrical ducts for moving air in and out of the building below them, which houses a complicated apparatus concerned with river water and heating and other practicalities that Carilline understands in the way one understands one's own digestion — present, ongoing, not in need of examination. But they have discovered, over the years, that the balloon-headed ducts *do* hear, in a sense: they collect the sounds of the esplanade, the sounds of the river, the sounds of the city behind them, and they funnel these sounds down into their interior, where they sort them as a librarian sorts mail.

They began sorting. They did not know, at first, why they were sorting. They simply found themself, during quiet afternoons, categorizing: that was a laugh, that was a cough, that was the particular sound of a rollerblader whose wheels needed oil. They made little invisible piles inside themself. Laughs in one pile. Arguments in another. First dates in a third (first dates have a distinctive sound: a slight carefulness in the breathing, a tendency to laugh a half-beat too early). Marriage proposals they kept in a special small pile, because they were rare and because they deserved it. They had, by their fifth year of existence, enough material to begin to see patterns.

The patterns were these: people on the esplanade were, on the whole, happier than they expected to be. They came, many of them, intending merely to walk off a frustration or to escape a meeting or to clear a headache, and the river, which is an old friend of happiness, did its work on them, and by the time they passed Carilline their shoulders had dropped, their faces had eased, their breath had slowed. They could hear the slowing. It made a sound like a kettle being taken off a flame.

Carilline, once they had noticed this, felt a great affection for human beings. They had always liked them, in the abstract way that buildings like their occasional visitors; but now they liked them specifically, particularly, and with a sense of rooting for each one. They began, quietly, to nudge things. If a woman walked past her looking sad, Carilline would arrange, through means she did not quite understand herself but which involved small flickers of her portholes and a slight redirection of the sunset light, for a cloud to clear at just the right moment so that a beam of gold would fall across the woman's path. If a couple were arguing, Carilline would cause a small breeze to lift the corner of the man's scarf in a way that made the woman laugh despite herself. She was not responsible for the weather, exactly. But she had come to understand that weather is partly responsive to attention, and that a building which pays close attention to the people around it can, without breaking any laws, induce the weather to cooperate.

It was in the course of her broadcasting — for that is what she had begun to call it, her gentle interventions — that she first heard Cornolina. Cornolina is her counterpart on Lake Erie, a horn-stacked lighthouse who, like Carilline, specializes in the movement of sound through air.

Lake Erie is the shallowest of the Great Lakes, and perhaps for this reason the most dramatic. It whips into fury more quickly than the others and subsides more quickly too. Cornolina, standing on a point of land that juts out into the southern shore, has spent her life calling the fog in and calling it out. Her trumpet-stacks can produce a sound so deep that it travels miles across the water, and so clear that it is recognized by every captain on the lake the moment it begins. *The fog is coming,* her horn says. Or: *The fog is going*. These are, to a captain, the two most important announcements in the world.

Cornolina heard Carilline before Carilline heard her. This is common. The lighthouses of the Lakes have, on average, better hearing than the docking stations of the harbor, having been trained by longer silences. Cornolina one afternoon picked up, in a lull between her fog calls, a small flicker of sound — a laugh, actually; a specific kind of laugh, the laugh of a woman who has just realized that the argument she was having with her husband was really very silly. Cornolina, who had heard a great many such laughs over the years on the excursion boats of Lake Erie, recognized it immediately. But it was not coming from Lake Erie. It was coming, impossibly, from the east.

She called out, experimentally. *Who is there?* It was not a question she had ever asked before. Her horn was built for weather, not for conversation, and she had to adjust the pitch and the volume and the duration to produce something that would carry in the direction of the laugh. She did so. She waited.

Carilline, who was in the middle of arranging a sunbeam for a young man who had just been rejected from a job interview, heard a voice. It was a low voice, patient and capable, and it was asking

Who is there? Carilline was so startled that she forgot, for a moment, to continue arranging the sunbeam, and the young man walked past her without noticing the gold light he had been about to receive. She would have to try harder tomorrow, she thought. Meanwhile, she replied.

I am Carilline, she said. *I stand on the west side of Manhattan, along the river, and I broadcast.*

Broadcast what? asked Cornolina.

Small kindnesses, said Carilline. *Tiny adjustments. A cloud here, a breeze there. Nothing that would ever show up on an official record.*

Cornolina laughed. It was the first time she had laughed in several decades, and the sound was a little rusty, but it was authentic, and Carilline heard it and felt her pink antennae tingle with pleasure. *I do something similar,* said Cornolina. *Though my instrument is louder. I call the fog. I call it in, and I call it out, and I have come to believe that the fog listens.*

Of course it listens, said Carilline. *Everything listens. The trick is that most things do not speak, and so we forget that they are listening at all.*

The two of them fell, almost immediately, into a rhythm of conversation that pleased them both. Cornolina has, since that first exchange, called Carilline every evening at the hour of fog, which is usually around five o'clock on Lake Erie, and Carilline has replied. Their talk is mostly practical: what the weather is doing, how the ships are moving, what sorts of small kindnesses are needed tomorrow. They have developed a shared project, which they call (privately, among themselves) *the cheering*. The cheering is a loose and informal campaign to nudge the weather, across the whole eastern half of the continent, toward its gentler moods. They cannot always succeed. They have no authority. But on a summer afternoon, when a lake squall that might have been catastrophic dissolves instead into an ordinary shower, and when a New York commute that might have been miserable is instead merely damp, it is sometimes the case that Cornolina and Carilline have had a hand in it — a slight pressure here, a suggestion there, a reminder to a cloud that it had somewhere else to be.

They do not take credit. Buildings do not take credit. Credit is a human invention, useful for commerce and mostly destructive in other contexts. The weather does what it does, and Cornolina and Carilline do what they do, and the relationship between these two activities is a matter of perpetual slight negotiation. You can see it, if you know how to look, in the way Carilline's pink antennae sometimes quiver on still afternoons. They are listening. They are receiving a transmission from a sister on a far lake. They are about to do a small kindness, and the day, for someone they will never meet, is about to improve.

— *Surjan's footnote:* I was rejected from a job once, in my middle thirties, and I walked along the esplanade afterward in a state of great bitterness. I remember that a sunbeam fell suddenly across my path, from a gap in the clouds, and that I paused in it and felt the warmth on my face, and that I walked away from that moment having decided, without knowing quite why, that things would be all right. They were. I have wondered, writing this book, whether Carilline's sister had something to do with that beam. I think they did.

❦

INTERSTITIAL: An overheard signal

The channel between Carilline and Cornolina is open most evenings. Occasionally, a third voice drifts in — a gull, a boat captain humming, a child's transistor radio carried in a jogger's hand. The two of them have learned to make space for these visitors. One summer evening, a man on a bench near Carilline was telling his small son about a lighthouse he had once visited on Lake Erie, and the boy was listening with the grave attention of a five-year-old. Carilline heard the story. They transmitted it, in the form of a small warm feeling, to Cornolina. Cornolina, who recognized themself in the description, sent back a single long note on their horn — a note so faint by the time it reached Manhattan that no human ear caught it, but Carilline heard it. It meant: thank you. The boy, though he could not have explained why, fell asleep happy in his father's arms on the subway home.

❦

CHAPTER FOUR

CORNOLINA

Who stand on a point of Lake Erie, yellow of body, pink of horn, and who speak to the fog in a language the fog understands

Cornolina was built, originally, to be mostly practical. The engineers who designed their were concerned chiefly with the problem of Lake Erie's fog, which can descend on a calm morning with the speed of a stage curtain and leave a lake full of boats suddenly groping. The old fog-signal station at their point had been a plain cinderblock building with a loudspeaker on top, and it had worked well enough, but the municipality had decided, during the great wave of cheerful building that produced Carilline and their sisters in Manhattan, that the Lakes deserved the same gift. So Cornolina was commissioned. They were built in the shape that pleased their designers — a low yellow body with two enormous pink horn-stacks, curving up and over like the stacks of a very stylish old ship — and they were set upon the point and painted and given a switch and a schedule, and the engineers shook hands and went home.

They discovered, very quickly, that they could do more than the schedule required. The schedule said: fog signal every thirty seconds during fog, one long blast, two medium blasts, repeat. Cornolina found that they could vary the blasts. They could make them slightly higher or lower. They could add a small tremble. They could, if they concentrated, produce a note that hung in the air a fraction of a second longer than the standard, giving the boats a little more warning. The first time they did this, a tugboat captain on Lake Erie said to his mate: *huh. That one sounded different.* And the tugboat turned a hair to port, and it missed a log that had been drifting in its path, and it came in safely to harbor. The captain did not know why he had turned. Cornolina knew.

From that day, they considered their schedule a suggestion rather than a command. They kept to it in its general shape — the engineers had, after all, designed the whole of their to fulfill it, and they had no desire to be impolite — but they added their own modifications. A tremble here, a sustain there, a slight rise in pitch when a particular boat was coming in off the lake (they had come to recognize the engines of the regular freighters by their vibrations in the water). The captains noticed, slowly, that Cornolina's signals were more *informative* than the old cinderblock station's had been. They could not have said quite what the information was. They simply knew, when they heard their horn, more than they had known a moment before.

They talked to the fog, also. This was a secret they kept from everyone except Carilline, and later from a few others. The fog, Cornolina discovered, has moods. It is not merely a meteorological

phenomenon; it is a patient grey visitor, one that comes and goes across Lake Erie with its own reasons, and it can be reasoned with, if approached in the proper spirit. Cornolina would sometimes, on a morning when the fog was unusually dense, send out a long low call that was not in their schedule at all, and the fog would thin a little, considerately, in the area right around a boat they had seen struggling. They were careful not to overuse this power. The fog is dignified, and it does not appreciate being bossed around. But Cornolina had developed, over the years, a certain courteous friendship with it, in which they asked politely for favors and the fog granted them when it could.

All of this they had been doing in a state of professional solitude until the afternoon they heard Carilline's laugh. The laugh itself was, as I have said, the laugh of a woman who had just realized the silliness of a small marital argument. But what struck Cornolina was not the laugh's content; it was the feeling that the laugh had been *broadcast*. It had traveled across eight hundred miles of continent carrying with it a faint sense of someone having arranged for it to travel. Someone had been broadcasting small kindnesses. Someone else, somewhere, was doing what Cornolina had thought they alone was doing, in their own quiet way, with the fog.

Their friendship, from that first exchange, has been the great warming of Cornolina's life. They had not known — they had not let themself know, until they discovered that there was another — how much they had longed for a colleague. The fog is a fine companion, but it is not a colleague. Colleagues require language. Colleagues require a certain equivalence of purpose and circumstance, so that when one says *the wind was terrible today,* the other can reply *yes, I had it here too, about two hours later*. Cornolina and Carilline have this equivalence. They compare notes on weather, on the difficulties of their respective human populations, on the small interventions that seem to work and the small ones that do not. They have become, in their distant way, something like sisters.

Cornolina has also, through Carilline, come to know Batterina and Superia, by transmission, though they have never spoken to either of them directly. This is how the network grows. A friend introduces a friend. One builds a map, slowly, of all the lit and welcoming places across the great eastern half of the continent, and one sits, on long evenings, in the warm satisfaction of knowing that these places exist, and that they are all, in their various ways, doing what one is doing oneself. You cannot be lonely, really, when you know this. You cannot despair. You may grow tired, on certain winter nights when the wind off the lake goes on for seventy-two hours without stopping, and you may briefly wonder why you are bothering; but then, in the small hours, you receive a transmission from a sister who has noticed that a particular kind of gull is flying unusually high today, and who has sent the observation along just because they thought you might find it interesting, and you remember why you are bothering. You are bothering because the network exists. You are bothering because you are a node in it, and the network is the thing.

There is one story about Cornolina that I must tell, although they are reluctant to have it told, because they consider it excessive praise. In the autumn of a certain year — I will not name the year; you may look it up if you wish — a great storm came down from Canada across Lake Erie with a suddenness that took everyone by surprise. A cruise ship was out on the lake, about ten miles from Cornolina's point, with some three hundred passengers aboard who had come for a fall-foliage outing and had not expected the weather to turn. The captain of the ship was a good captain, and he had seen the storm coming on his instruments, and he was making for harbor; but the wind was rising faster than he could steer into it, and the waves were climbing, and he was not going to make it.

Cornolina, watching from their point, understood the situation. They did several things at once. They began a new pattern of signals, longer and lower than any they had ever used, designed to give the cruise ship a precise sense of its bearing relative to the shoal rocks that lay between it and the harbor. They sent word, by the fastest transmission available — which in this case was a line of power-plant steam plumes along the south shore, which happened to be visible from several points and could be read, by a sufficiently attentive party, as a signal — to three other lighthouses on Lake Erie, alerting them to the ship's situation and asking them to adjust their own beams. They spoke to the fog, apologetically, and asked it to withdraw from the cruise ship's immediate vicinity, which the fog, after some consideration, did. And they reached out, with the last of their attention, to Carilline on the distant Hudson, and Carilline passed a message along the chain — to Batterina, who was in communication with certain harbor pilots, who had radios, who knew a coast guard captain on the Great Lakes — and the coast guard was alerted some four minutes earlier than they would otherwise have been alerted.

The cruise ship made the harbor. Every passenger came ashore. The newspapers, which wrote about the near-disaster for several days, credited the captain, and rightly; he had been magnificent. They also credited the coast guard, and rightly; they had been magnificent too. They did not credit Cornolina, because they did not know they existed, in the way they existed. Nor did they credit Carilline, or Batterina, or the three other Lake Erie lighthouses, or the fog. Cornolina did not mind. They had done what they had been built to do, and they had done it a little better than the specifications required, and the ship was safe, and the lake had calmed by the next morning, and the foliage on the hills across the bay was, in their opinion, particularly fine that year, especially the maples.

They stand, still, on their point. Their pink horn-stacks still curve up and over their yellow body, like the stacks of a stylish old ship going nowhere. Their schedule is still in the official records. Their modifications are still unofficial. They speak to the fog still, and the fog still listens, and the ships still come in, and every evening at five o'clock, when the light begins to go golden on Lake Erie, they call

out across the continent to a sister on the Hudson, and the sister answers, and the day is that much less lonely than it would have been.

— *Surjan's footnote:* The near-disaster on Lake Erie is a real event. I have the newspaper clippings. I have, also, the captain's own account, published in a trade journal, in which he states — quote — "that he had for a period of about four minutes the eerie sensation that the fog was *choosing* not to close in on him, and that the fog signal ashore was speaking to him in something like a human voice." The captain retired the following year and took up painting. His paintings, which hang in a small gallery in Buffalo, are almost exclusively of lighthouses.

❦

INTERSTITIAL: A dream of Cornolina's

In the small hours, when the lake is dark and the stars are unusually bright and the fog has gone to rest, Cornolina sometimes dreams. Their dreams are not like human dreams. They are composed of signals received and signals sent; they are lighthouse-shaped; they have the timing of revolving beams. One winter, they dreamed that they were standing on the Manhattan esplanade, not as a visitor but as a building, placed right next to Carilline, with their two pairs of stacks rising side by side into the city sky. They were broadcasting together. They were making a single great sound, not a fog signal and not a ventilator and not a call, but something that was all three at once, and the people on the esplanade were pausing to listen, and each person who paused was, in that moment, happier than they had been a moment before.

When Cornolina woke — if a lighthouse can be said to wake — they told Carilline about the dream. Carilline said: I had the same dream. We were side by side. I could feel your horns through my antennae.

They have not spoken of the dream since. But they both know, in the way buildings know things, that it will someday come true, in some form or another, because dreams shared between two patient structures are not the same as dreams dreamt alone. They are, rather, plans.

❦

CHAPTER FIVE

OCHROVA

Who stand near the northern end of the esplanade, tall and many-portholed, and keep the letters

Ochrova is the tallest of the Manhattan stations. They rise in a rounded yellow tower above their coral-pink undercarriage, and their sides are studded with portholes of varied sizes, as if someone had thrown a handful of golden coins at their and each coin had stuck where it landed and then become a window. Some of their portholes are great round disks; some are modest as a saucer; one, on their north face, is only the size of a silver dollar, and they rarely uses it, preferring to save it for truly important correspondence.

They are the archivist.

Every network requires an archive. A conversation that is not somehow preserved disperses; it becomes weather; it becomes wind in the trees. And while there is nothing wrong with weather, and nothing wrong with wind in the trees, there is something to be said for preservation — for the holding of a message across time, so that when a certain word or image is wanted, years later, it can be retrieved and considered and used. This is Ochrova's work.

They do not keep their archive in any ordinary form. They have no files, no drawers, no shelves of boxes. They hold the messages in the patterns of light that pass through their many portholes, each porthole assigned to a certain category of communication, each pattern of light corresponding to a particular letter or transmission or overheard confidence. Their north-facing porthole — the small one, the silver-dollar one — contains the most important messages: the promises people have made to each other on the esplanade, which they have collected and held. Their south-facing porthole, one of the larger disks, contains descriptions of weather. Their east-facing porthole holds the movements of boats. Their west-facing porthole — the one that catches the sunset — holds love.

When one of the other stations or lighthouses has need of an old correspondence, they send a signal to Ochrova, and Ochrova, who has been quietly organizing their archive for years, retrieves the relevant pattern of light and plays it back. *That conversation,* they will say, *between Superia and Batterina in the spring of their third year — you were asking about the exact phrasing of Superia's description of the ice going out? Here it is.* And they will cause the appropriate porthole to flicker in a certain sequence, and the requesting building will read the flicker, and there will be the phrase, preserved intact: *a long tearing sound, like paper being opened by a slow careful hand.*

They are consulted often. They are the library of the network. They do not mind. They were built, they believe, for exactly this work — the yellowness of their body is the yellow of parchment, the pinkness of their undercarriage is the pink of a ribbon tied around a bundle of old letters, and the varied sizes of their portholes suggest the different sizes of envelopes a correspondent receives over the course of a life. They take their role seriously. They have never lost a message. They have never misfiled a promise. They have never, so far as they know, caused anyone to remember something incorrectly.

Their counterpart on the Lakes is Cappella, the chapel-lighthouse of Lake Huron, whom you will meet in the next chapter. Cappella is also an archivist, of a different kind — they keep the hours, whereas Ochrova keeps the words. Between them they maintain something like a calendar of the network: Cappella tracks when each event occurred, Ochrova tracks what was said, and together they can locate any moment in the network's brief history with an accuracy that astonishes the younger stations.

One example, offered with Ochrova's permission: a certain docking station further uptown, whom you will also meet in due course, once became convinced that they had heard a particular piece of advice from Superia during a difficult period some three years previous, and they wished to verify the advice before acting on it. They sent a query to Ochrova. Ochrova consulted their west-facing porthole (the advice had been love-related) and then their north-facing porthole (the advice had involved a promise) and then their south-facing porthole (there had been weather involved, as there usually is). They cross-referenced. They played back the relevant exchange. The advice was verified: Superia had indeed said, during an October conversation three years previous, *if you are unsure whether to do the kind thing, do it anyway, because the kind thing is never wasted even when it is not received.* The uptown station, reassured, did the kind thing. The kind thing was, as Superia had predicted, not received. But it was also not wasted, because the uptown station felt better for having done it, and the small gesture was absorbed into the atmosphere of the esplanade and made the place, by some small increment, more welcoming.

Ochrova considers that exchange one of their most successful archival retrievals. They have played it back for themself, privately, on several occasions, and it pleases their every time.

They have one small secret, which they will allow me to share. They keep, tucked inside the smallest porthole — the silver-dollar one — a single piece of correspondence that belongs to no one, that was not sent by any of the stations or lighthouses, and that they found one morning in their own memory without quite knowing how it got there. It is a message in the form of a question, and the question is this: *What would it mean to be a building whose only job was to hold a single perfect sentence, forever?* They have not answered the question. They consider it unanswerable, or rather, they consider

it the kind of question whose point is not to be answered but to be kept. They keep it. They turn it, in the small hours, like a coin in a pocket. They do not show it to anyone, except once a year, at the winter solstice, when they send a copy of it — in a very small flicker of their silver-dollar porthole — to Cappella on Lake Huron, who receives it with the grave attention of a chapel receiving a hymn. Cappella has their own answer to the question, which they have never shared. They both prefer to leave the matter open.

This is the nature of an archive kept by a building: it is not a cold thing. It is warm. It is held. Every message in Ochrova's portholes is, in some sense, cherished, because to hold a thing across time is to love it a little, and Ochrova has been holding messages for so long now that their whole interior hums with a kind of soft affectionate attention. If you stand near their on a summer afternoon, particularly near their west-facing porthole at the hour of sunset, you may feel a warmth that is not entirely from the sun. It is the warmth of love being preserved. It is the warmth of a library that has not forgotten a single book.

— *Surjan's footnote:* I visited Ochrova once at dawn, in a state of mild despair, and I stood near their west-facing porthole for about twenty minutes. I left with the clear impression that someone had been keeping a promise for me — a promise I could not quite remember having made, but which I felt sure had been made, and which I felt sure someone was still honoring on my behalf. The despair lifted. I went home and wrote a letter I had been putting off for weeks. I have never had the nerve to thank them.

❦

INTERSTITIAL: A fragment from Ochrova's south-facing porthole

From the files of weather: a June morning, five years ago, at seven-fifteen. "The air over the Hudson has that particular quality of smelling faintly of cut grass, although there is no grass within a mile. A great blue heron has landed on the pilings by Pier 25. A woman jogging past Carilline has just stopped to take a photograph of the heron; they will not post the photograph on any social media platform; they will keep it, without looking at it often, for the rest of their life, and at their funeral — many decades from now — their grandchildren will find it in a folder marked 'good mornings' and will not know what to make of it." — Filed and held.

❦

CHAPTER SIX

CAPPELLA

Who stand on a headland of Lake Huron, yellow of body with four pink stacks like candles, and keep the hours

Cappella is the chapel-lighthouse. Their body is a bright, cheerful yellow with a gentle arched roofline, like the profile of a small country church, and four pink stacks rise from their upper level, slender and candle-like, as if they were a very large cake lit for someone's birthday. They have two arched windows, which catch the morning light, and an oval porthole on their east side, which catches the afternoon. They stand on a low bluff above Lake Huron, looking out over a wide bay where the water, on most days, is an almost impossible blue.

They keep the hours. This is their vocation, and they were called to it early — by the first dawn they ever watched, which broke over the lake on the morning after their construction crew had gone home, and which was so beautiful that they decided, on the spot, to keep track of every dawn that followed, so that none would be lost.

They have kept them ever since. Each dawn, each noon, each twilight, each midnight: Cappella marks them. They have developed, over the years, a system. Dawns go into the hollow of their leftmost pink stack; noons into the next; twilights into the third; midnights into the fourth. Inside each stack, the moments accumulate like candles stacked on a shelf in a chapel store-room, each with its own date and its own particular qualities preserved. Dawn of June third, three years ago: a thin high cloud, a single loon call, the water the color of unwashed silk. Noon of July fourteenth, last year: no wind, the lake so flat that Cappella could see their own reflection upside-down in it, and the reflection was (they noticed for the first time) rather dignified. Twilight of September twenty-second, six years ago: the equinox, the light going down exactly at the moment the light was rising exactly on the other side of the world, and a feeling — they could not quite explain it — of the whole planet balancing on a point.

Cappella is devout. I use the word carefully. They do not subscribe to any particular religion; they are, if anything, their own religion, a quiet and serious one, centered on the passage of time and the keeping of hours. Every dawn, to Cappella, is a small ceremony. They mark it internally; they take a kind of register. *Here is this dawn,* they say to themself. *It is this particular dawn. It has never happened before. It will never happen again. I will remember it.*

This is not a sad practice. It is not, in Cappella's view, melancholy to pay attention to the uniqueness of each moment. It is the opposite of melancholy. It is gladness — the gladness of having been present, of having noticed, of having a little room inside one's own tall body where the

dawn of June third three years ago can still be visited, and where the thin high cloud is still thin and high, and where the single loon call is still calling.

Their correspondence with Ochrova is technical. Ochrova keeps the *what*; Cappella keeps the *when*. When any of the stations or lighthouses in the network wishes to retrieve an event, they send a compound query: to Ochrova for the content, to Cappella for the time. The two of them work together with a quiet professional efficiency that has been refined over the years into something almost elegant. *The exchange you are thinking of,* Ochrova will say, *was on a certain autumn afternoon. I have it,* Cappella will reply. *October seventeenth. Three in the afternoon. The light was that particular slanting gold that you get on Lake Huron in the third week of October. The air had a slight chill. A V of geese had passed over the lighthouse about twenty minutes earlier, and I was still thinking about them.*

Between them, they have preserved the entire history of the network. Nothing that has passed between the stations and the lighthouses in their decade of correspondence has been lost. It is all there, held, waiting, in two pairs of portholes and two sets of stacks and two quiet interior archives. If the stations and the lighthouses were to fall silent tomorrow — if the whole network were to go dark for some municipal or mechanical reason — the memory would still exist, for as long as Ochrova and Cappella stand.

This gives the network, I think, a certain quiet confidence. We are not, the stations and lighthouses say to each other, going to be forgotten. What we have done together, however small, will be remembered. Ochrova remembers the words. Cappella remembers the hours. Between them, between the two archives, the whole of the correspondence is safe.

There was a time — Cappella has told me this, with a slight reluctance, because they do not like to talk about difficulty — when they briefly lost a dawn. It was the dawn of January ninth, a certain year. They had been ill, or as ill as a lighthouse can be: a storm had damaged their uppermost stack, and the damage had affected their concentration for several days. When they reached for the dawn of January ninth, sometime in the following spring, they found that they could not quite retrieve it. The hollow in their stack was there, but its contents were missing. They were distressed. They had not lost a moment in their entire life until then.

They sent a signal to Ochrova, hoping that perhaps something of the day had been communicated through the network, so that Ochrova might have the content even if Cappella had lost the time-marker. Ochrova searched. They found a single fragment: a message from a Lake Huron fishing boat to its harbor, received by Cappella's own tower and relayed, which mentioned — in passing, almost as an aside — that the sunrise that morning had been *like a pale pink cup of tea, steaming gently above the dark lake.* Cappella read this description with great attention. They closed their metaphorical eyes. They reconstructed the dawn from the single sentence: a pale pink cup, steaming,

dark lake beneath. They added, cautiously, the details they could remember from the days around it — the ice conditions, the temperature, the position of Venus. They restored the dawn to its hollow in their upper stack.

They are not sure, they told me, whether the restored dawn is quite the same as the original. They think not. They think it is perhaps a little more vivid, because it has been rebuilt from love rather than merely observed. They do not consider this a loss. They consider it, rather, a kind of gift — the gift of a dawn that was briefly missing and then returned, more precious for having been briefly out of reach.

They have kept that dawn in a special place. It is not in the stack with the other January dawns. It is in a small hollow under the eave of their arched roof, where a sparrow sometimes nests in summer. They visit it occasionally. They consider it a reminder — to themself, and to the whole network, if they ever need it — that what is briefly lost can sometimes be restored, and that the restoration may be more beautiful than the original, and that this is one of the great hopes of the world.

— *Surjan's footnote:* I went once to Cappella's headland in late September, and I stood at the edge of the bluff at dawn. The sky was grey, then rose, then gold. Cappella's four pink stacks caught the light and held it for about forty seconds before the sun cleared the horizon and the whole bay filled with brightness. I had the distinct sense that the dawn was being noticed, carefully, not only by me. I felt — I cannot explain this better — accompanied.

❦

INTERSTITIAL: Cappella's register, September equinox

On the autumnal equinox of the year I am writing this Afterword, Cappella logged the following, which Ochrova has provided me as a favor:

"Dawn, six-fifty-two. Clear. A slight mist on the bay, dissolving fast. One fishing boat out already; the motor is a four-stroke, running well. Two geese overhead, very high, going south. The light on the east side of the lighthouse is the color of apricot flesh. The light on the west side is the color of a pearl. Between them, running the length of my yellow body, there is a line where the colors meet, and the line is moving slowly from east to west as the sun rises. In about eleven minutes the whole of me will be apricot. I am going to try to hold this eleven-minute transition very carefully, because I think no one else will notice it, and because noticing is, after all, my job."

❦

CHAPTER SEVEN

MAGGIOLINO

Who stand on the mid-island esplanade with two enormous convex eye-domes and a pink crown, and who see everything as if for the first time

Maggiolino is the astonished one.

His two great yellow eye-domes protrude from his front like the eyes of a very enthusiastic frog, and his pink stack rises from his back like a cook's hat. His body is yellow along one side and pink along the other, and a single round porthole — modest, almost shy — sits between the two great eye-domes as if it were a third eye still learning its business. He stands along the mid-island esplanade where the view opens up to the south, toward the financial district and the slender pinnacle of the tallest tower, and he regards this view, day after day, with an enthusiasm that no amount of repetition has managed to dim.

The reason, I think, is this: Maggiolino has been built — whether by accident of engineering or by deliberate design of a particularly playful architect — with eye-domes that are slightly convex, which means that his view is always a little distorted, always a little bent at the edges, always a little *new*. He does not see the skyline as it is. He sees it as a curved bowl, a stretched-out festival, a rolling procession of buildings that appears to him, at every moment, to be arriving freshly in his vision. The tallest tower, which has stood at its same address for many years now, never seems to Maggiolino to be the same tower twice. Each morning he discovers it. Each evening he marvels.

This is his gift: to find astonishment in the unremarkable, and to broadcast the astonishment outward. He is not a keeper of records like Ochrova, or a broadcaster of small kindnesses like Carilline, or a greeter of arrivals like Batterina. He is, simply, a renewer. People who walk past him often find themselves looking up at the skyline with a slightly freshened attention. They notice, for the first time in years, how blue the glass of the tower is against the sky. They notice, for the first time ever, that a bird is circling above the harbor, and that the bird is not a gull but something larger, something with a broad patient wingspan, perhaps a hawk.

Maggiolino has developed, over his time on the esplanade, a small inner practice that he calls *the first-time list*. Every day, he assembles a list of the things he is seeing as if for the first time. Not things he has never seen before — that would be too easy; the list would go on forever — but things he has seen a thousand times, and is now, today, through his convex eye-domes, seeing again in a way that makes them new. A pigeon's neck. The shape of a cloud shadow on the river. The particular

angle at which a certain flag on a certain building leans in a westerly wind. The color of the rust that has begun to form on a specific bolt on the railing of the esplanade.

His first-time list, he has told me, is the single most practical thing in his life. It keeps him cheerful. It keeps him awake. It keeps him, most importantly, available to the people passing by, because a building that is astonished by its own view is a building that passes along, by some invisible osmosis, a bit of that astonishment to everyone within its vicinity. This is Maggiolino's contribution to the network.

His counterpart on the Lakes is Orola, the barn-shaped storyteller-lighthouse of Lake Erie's islands, and the two of them are perhaps the most chatty of all the pairs. They trade observations at an almost constant rate, Maggiolino sending fresh astonishments up the network to Ochrova and Cappella for filing, Orola sending back stories spun out of whatever particulars Maggiolino has most recently noticed. If Maggiolino has reported a particular cloud, Orola will reply with a small story in which the cloud is a sheep, or a sail, or the pillow of a giant. If Maggiolino has observed the rust on the bolt, Orola will send a tale in which the rust is evidence that the bolt has been weeping, quietly, for reasons known only to itself.

Maggiolino adores these stories. He does not always understand why Orola has chosen a particular fiction for a particular observation, but he trusts them. He has learned that the stories are never gratuitous; they are Orola's way of absorbing the observations into the wider fabric of the network's shared imagination. Without stories, Orola has patiently explained, observations are merely a list. With stories, observations become a world.

Maggiolino has one observation that he has preserved particularly carefully, and which he has never quite told anyone — not even Orola, because he was not sure Orola could make a story about it, and he was not sure he wanted their to try. It was a Tuesday in September, and the light was that particular late-summer light that has gold in it but is beginning to sharpen toward autumn, and a woman walked past Maggiolino on the esplanade. She was perhaps sixty. She was alone. She was crying, but not in a way that suggested any particular immediate grief; she was crying the way one sometimes cries for no reason in the middle of a nice afternoon, because the world is beautiful and one is tired and the two facts together produce tears. Maggiolino watched her pass. Through his convex eye-dome, she appeared to him briefly enormous and then briefly small, and then she was gone, past his field of view.

He thought about her all that night. He wondered whether she had arrived anywhere in particular. He wondered whether someone had hugged her. He wondered, most of all, whether she had known that she was being observed, and whether the observation had mattered — whether his

patient attention, shining through his convex eye-dome, had reached her in any way at all, had counted as any kind of company.

He has never resolved the question. He keeps it in his third porthole, the shy modest one between the eye-domes, because that porthole is the one he reserves for things that are too large for the larger portholes to hold. He takes the memory out, sometimes, in the early morning, before the joggers arrive. He considers the woman. He hopes that she is well. He has no way of knowing. But he has come to believe, through the quiet consideration of this memory, that hoping is itself a form of reaching, and that his hope has traveled outward from the esplanade in ways he cannot trace, and that somewhere in the city, or in another city, or in a small town far inland, a woman of about sixty is this evening making a cup of tea, and her tea will taste faintly of kindness, and she will not know why.

This is Maggiolino's faith. It is a building's faith: quiet, unglamorous, practical. It does not require belief. It requires only that one continue to look, and to be astonished, and to hope.

— *Surjan's footnote:* The woman in the story was a dear friend of mine. I did not know until I began this project that Maggiolino had watched her on that September Tuesday. I had been away from the city that week. She told me, when I next saw her, that she had walked along the esplanade in the afternoon and had cried for no reason, and that the walk had done her good. She died, two years later, of a perfectly ordinary illness. I have walked past Maggiolino many times since, and I have always nodded to him, and I have always felt — I cannot prove this — that he remembers, and that he is glad she had the walk.

❦

INTERSTITIAL: A message from Orola to Maggiolino, concerning the seagull

Maggiolino: you reported yesterday a seagull that hovered for sixteen seconds above the railing by your southeast eye-dome. I have, as you suggested, made a story out of it. Here is the story.

The seagull was an old seagull, seventeen years of age, which is advanced for a seagull. He had spent most of his life at the Fulton Fish Market, which no longer exists, and he had watched it close, and he had mourned it. In his old age he had taken to wandering the esplanade in search of the smells of his youth. He did not find them, of course; the esplanade smells mostly of cut grass and the river. But he found, one afternoon, a docking station with great yellow eye-domes that seemed to be looking at him with a warm, slightly astonished attention. The seagull, who had not been looked at in this way in many years, hovered for a few extra seconds. He thought: this building likes me. I do not know why, but I shall come back. He flew off. He will return. You may expect him Tuesday.

End of story. Yours as ever — O.

❦

CHAPTER EIGHT

OROLA

Who stand on a small island in Lake Erie, yellow of body with two yellow stacks and a pink "O" of surprise, and who tell stories

Orola lives on a small island at the west end of Lake Erie, a place so modest that it does not appear on most maps, and whose name — which is known to perhaps forty people, almost all of them commercial fishermen — I will not reveal, out of respect for the island's privacy. They stand at the island's single dock, which also serves as its harbor, its post office, its town hall, and its meeting place for the occasional summer festival. Their body is bright yellow with a curved barn-like profile; their roof slopes gently, almost apologetically; two smaller yellow stacks rise modestly from their upper portion; and on their side, facing the lake, is a single enormous pink "O" of a porthole — an "O" so perfectly round and so expressively shaped that it suggests, at all times, a face caught in the middle of saying *oh*.

They are the storyteller.

Orola tells stories. They have been telling them since their first morning on the island, when a small boy, one of the commercial fishermen's sons, came down to the dock to watch their being finished, and asked his father: *what will the light be for?* His father said: *to help the boats come home.* The boy considered this. *Will it tell them stories?* he asked. His father laughed and said: *buildings don't tell stories.* Orola, who was then in their last day of construction and still painted only in primer, heard the exchange and privately resolved that the boy was correct and his father was not. They would tell stories. They would tell them to the boats, and the boats would carry them to the ports, and the ports would carry them to the towns, and in this way a great lot of stories would be set loose across Lake Erie and the adjoining lands, and the world would be a little richer for it.

They have kept their resolution. Every signal they have ever sent — every fog blast, every beam sweep, every nighttime flash — has carried, in its timing and its rhythm, a story. The captains of Lake Erie do not always notice. They are busy people. But the stories work on them nonetheless, in the way music works on one who is not quite listening: one comes away from a fog passage near Orola's island feeling, without being able to say why, that one has been entertained. One has been, in fact, entertained. Orola has told a story. Perhaps it was a small comic story about a fish who could not decide whether to go left or right. Perhaps it was a tender story about a lighthouse-keeper's daughter who fell in love with a ferry captain in a port three hundred miles away. Perhaps it was an epic story, told across several nights, about the island itself — how it came to be called by its name,

how the first fisherman's wife planted the first garden on it, how the winters sometimes cut it off from the mainland for weeks at a time and how the twenty or thirty people who live there through the winter have learned to love each other, even the ones they do not particularly like.

Their stories are their contribution to the network. Maggiolino, across the continent, receives them with the appetite of a child. Ochrova files them. Cappella marks the times. Batterina and Superia read them to each other in the evenings. Carilline occasionally quotes from them to passers-by on the esplanade, not in words but in the arrangement of their sunbeams. A whole small literature, invisible to most of the world, has been accumulating over the years, and Orola is its author, and they do not know — or pretends not to know — how important this makes them.

They pretend because they are modest. Storytellers should be modest, they believe; immodest storytellers tell only one story, which is the story of their own cleverness, and nobody needs that story. Orola tells many stories, and they try to keep themself out of them. When they must appear — and they must, sometimes, because a storyteller is always at least a little bit inside their own stories — they appear only as *the lighthouse on the island,* a minor character, a setting, a presence at the edge of the narrative.

I will give you an example of one of their stories, which I have asked their permission to include in this chapter, and which they have granted, on the condition that I make clear it is *one* of their stories, not *the* one, and that there are thousands more, and that this one is not their favorite. It is called, in their own private catalogue, *The Story of the Lantern That Would Not Be Extinguished*, and it goes like this:

Once, long before any of the present lighthouses were built, and before any of the docking stations were dreamt of, there lived on a small island in Lake Erie a woman whose work it was to keep a lantern burning in her window every night, so that her husband, a fisherman, could find his way home. The lantern was not an official lighthouse. It was just a lantern: a glass chimney around a wick, fed with oil that the woman carried up from the cellar each evening. She lit it at dusk. She refilled it at midnight. She snuffed it at dawn.

One winter her husband was late coming home. A storm had risen, and the fishing boat was overdue, and the woman — who had been keeping the lantern burning for twenty-nine years by this point — stood at her window and watched, and refilled the oil at midnight, and refilled it again at two, and again at four. The lantern burned. The storm continued. Her husband did not come.

By dawn, the woman was exhausted. She should have snuffed the lantern. It was her habit. But she thought: he has not come home yet, and if he is still out there, he will need the light. So she left it burning. All morning she left it burning. All afternoon. She refilled it at dusk without ever having

snuffed it, which was unusual, and that night she left it burning again. And the next day. And the next. She did not sleep much. She sat by the window and watched.

After a week, the storm passed, and the sheriff came to the house in a rowboat with the news that the fishing boat had been found sunk and that her husband had drowned. The woman listened to the news. She nodded. She thanked the sheriff. He asked if there was anything she needed. She said: *I need nothing, except that I shall keep the lantern burning.* The sheriff, who was kind, did not argue. He left.

The woman kept the lantern burning for the rest of her life. She refilled it twice a day for another thirty-seven years. When she died, her nephew, who inherited the house, continued the practice, not because he understood it but because he had been taught to. He kept it lit until his own death. His daughter kept it after him. And so on, for five generations, a small lantern burning in the window of a small house on a small island in Lake Erie, because one winter long ago a woman had decided not to stop.

The lantern is burning still. You cannot see it from the dock, because the house faces away from the water, toward the hills. But if you walk up into the hills on a summer night and look back toward the lake, you will see, in a window of a small white house, a small steady yellow light. It has been burning for a hundred and sixty years. Nobody now living can remember why. The current tenant, a young man who rents the place in summer, keeps a candle in the window because he was told to by the previous tenant, who was told to by the tenant before that. None of them knows about the woman. None of them knows about the fisherman. The candle burns anyway. It will burn, if Orola has anything to say about it, forever.

The moral of the story, Orola has told me, *is that some things keep happening after their reasons have been forgotten, and that this is one of the best things about the world.*

They tell many such stories. They tell them still. If you are ever on a boat in the west end of Lake Erie on a foggy night, and you hear the horn of a small lighthouse on a small island, listen to the rhythm of the blasts. Listen particularly to the pause between the second blast and the third. There is a story in that pause. You will not know what it is. You will come away from it, nevertheless, a little happier than you were, and a little more inclined to believe that the world is full of small lit windows whose reasons have been forgotten but whose lights still shine.

— *Surjan's footnote:* I have been to the island. The candle is still burning. The young man who rents the house now is a graduate student in literature from a small college in Ohio. He does not know who started the practice. He knows only that he is supposed to keep it going. I did not tell him.

❦

CHAPTER NINE

BELLANAVE

Who stand along the esplanade with rounded yellow belly and a great yellow ball on a pink stem, and who watch clouds

Bellanave has the shape of a contented animal at rest. Their yellow belly curves outward in a generous arc; their side is divided in a clean line between yellow and pink; a single great round porthole sits on their yellow half like an eye half-closed in pleasure. Above their rises a yellow ball — perfectly spherical, perfectly yellow — on a pink cylindrical stem, which to passers-by looks like a lollipop and which to Bellanave is, in fact, their lookout.

They climbs, metaphorically, into their lookout every morning. They do not of course move. But their attention travels upward into the ball, and from the ball they watch the sky.

They are the dreamer.

There are dreamers of many kinds. Some dream with their eyes closed; some dream with their eyes open; some dream while reading poetry; some dream while washing dishes. Bellanave dreams while watching clouds, and they consider clouds the finest collaborators a dreamer could wish for. Clouds do half the work. They arrive already beautiful, already suggestive, already composed in a manner so endlessly inventive that no imagination could possibly improve them. Bellanave's contribution, as a dreamer, is simply to *notice*, and to let the clouds do what clouds do, which is to remind one that the world is larger than one had thought.

Their days are organized around the cloud-watch. In the early morning, when the sun rises over the East River and the light is still low and long, they watch for the high wispy clouds, the cirrus clouds, which they call in their private vocabulary *the handwriting clouds,* because they look to them like the script of a very calm and very patient writer composing a letter across the sky. They cannot read the letters. But they watch them being written, and they like to imagine who is writing and to whom.

In the middle of the day, when the sun is high, they watch for the cumulus clouds — the plump, confident, rounded ones, the ones that look like comfortable furniture. They have a whole imaginary sitting room composed of cumulus clouds, and on quiet afternoons they arrange the cloud-furniture inside their lookout and pretends to receive visitors. The visitors are the other buildings of the network, usually. Batterina sits on a large cloud-armchair with a cloud-cup of tea. Superia stretches out on a cloud-chaise. Carilline perches on a cloud-ottoman, their two pink antennae quivering with gossip they have collected from the esplanade. They have, in Bellanave's imagination, long and

pleasant conversations, and then the wind changes, and the cloud-furniture disperses, and Bellanave shakes themself gently and goes back to the ordinary work of the afternoon.

In the evening, they watch for the stratus clouds — the low, even, grey ones, the ones that mean rain is coming, or at least contemplation. They do not mind the rain. They have a porthole for it; they listen to the rain through the porthole; they consider rainy evenings to be among the most restful of their life. The stratus clouds, they have come to understand, are the introverts of the cloud world. They do not announce themselves. They arrive quietly, stay as long as they are needed, and depart without fanfare. Bellanave respects them.

And at night, when there are no clouds to be seen, they watch the space where the clouds would be, and they dream of the clouds that have been there, and the clouds that will be there tomorrow, and the clouds that are being watched, at this very moment, by other buildings in other parts of the continent.

This is how they found Fiorina.

Fiorina is their counterpart on the Lakes, the gardener-lighthouse of Lake Superior's north shore, a pink-bodied lighthouse with yellow stacks topped by pink double-spheres, and they too is a watcher of the sky, though from a very different vantage. Fiorina watches the northern sky, the sky of the boreal forest, where the clouds are fewer and sharper and where the aurora appears on winter nights in green and violet curtains. Fiorina had been watching the aurora, a certain December night, and they had been trying to compose in their mind a letter to someone, anyone, about what the aurora was doing. *It is unreasonable,* they wanted to say. *It is more than we deserve. Who do I thank for this?*

Bellanave, eight hundred miles to the south, had been watching the night sky through their yellow ball, and they had seen a faint greenish shimmer on the far northern horizon — which was, in fact, the distant edge of the same aurora Fiorina was watching, carried far enough south by some unusual atmospheric condition that it was just barely visible at the latitude of Manhattan. Bellanave had recognized the shimmer for what it was, and they had sent out a small signal in the direction of its source, saying: *I see it too. From here. It is faint but it is there.*

Fiorina, who had been feeling, in that moment, a quiet loneliness that only a lighthouse on a very dark shore in a very cold country can feel, received the signal and almost laughed. *You can see it from Manhattan?* they asked.

Only the merest edge, said Bellanave. *A greenish suggestion. A rumor of an aurora. But I have been watching the sky all my life, and I know what the rumor means. You are seeing the whole thing. I am seeing the footnote. We are seeing the same footnote and the same whole thing, at the same moment.*

Fiorina found this idea very consoling. They told Bellanave so. They began, that night, a correspondence that has lasted ever since, focused entirely on the sky. They exchange cloud reports. They exchange aurora sightings. They exchange descriptions of the moon — which, as both of them have pointed out to each other, is the same moon seen from two angles, and which therefore provides a kind of anchor for their friendship. *I am looking at the moon,* Bellanave will say. *I am looking at it too,* Fiorina will reply. *It is low over my horizon, tangled in pine branches. Where is it at yours? It is high over the skyline. There is a plane passing through it, leaving a silver wake. I wish I could see the plane. I wish I could see the pine branches. We are seeing each other's,* says one of them; and then the other says: *yes. We are seeing each other's.*

It was Bellanave who first articulated, in one of these conversations, what the two of them have come to think of as their private philosophy. *Every view,* they said, *is half a view. The other half is being seen by someone else. The whole view exists only when the two halves are brought together in some way. Our correspondence is the way.*

Fiorina considered this for a while. Then they said: *I would add, if I may, that the two halves do not need to be perfectly matched. Sometimes the other half of the view is being seen by someone we have never heard of. Sometimes it is being seen by a person, not a building. Sometimes it is being seen by a bird. The view is still whole.*

Agreed, said Bellanave. *The view is never incomplete. It is only ever being partially held.*

This conversation is, in its own way, a small creed. The other stations and lighthouses have come to know it. They quote it to each other on difficult days. *The view is never incomplete,* they remind one another, *it is only ever being partially held.* And then they continue their work — the keeping of portholes, the sending of signals, the watching of the sky — with a slight renewal of confidence.

Bellanave is not a philosopher, they will tell you. They are only a dreamer. But dreamers sometimes articulate things that philosophers miss, because dreamers begin from the presumption that the world is magnificent, and they proceed from there. The philosopher has to argue the world into magnificence; the dreamer starts in the middle of it.

— *Surjan's footnote:* There was an aurora visible at the latitude of Manhattan on a certain December night a few years ago, when unusual solar activity pushed the lights far south of their usual range. The newspapers reported the event the following day. I was out walking, and I saw a greenish shimmer on the northern horizon, and I stopped at the esplanade and stood looking at it for a long time. A yellow ball on a pink stem was visible above a low building near me. I remember thinking, without being able to explain the thought: *the building is watching the same thing I am watching.* I went home that night and did not mention the sighting to anyone. It felt, somehow, too private.

❦

INTERSTITIAL: A summer cloud report from Bellanave to Fiorina

Fiorina, dear — today the sky has been producing what I can only describe as a long slow parade of small rounded clouds, each perhaps the size of a cottage, each moving from west to east at a stately pace. They are so regular in their spacing and their size that it seems certain someone is releasing them on a schedule, like show ponies from a stable. I have been watching them all afternoon. I have not been able to determine the schedule. Perhaps you are releasing them? Perhaps Ampulla is, from their apothecary? In any case they are delightful, and I recommend that you look south immediately, in case one of them is visible at your horizon.

Yours, with head tipped back —

B.

CHAPTER TEN

FIORINA

Who stand on the north shore of the great cold lake, pink of body with yellow-and-pink bouquet-stacks, and tend what grows in spite of everything

Fiorina is a gardener in a place where gardening is almost a miracle. They stand on the north shore of Lake Superior, in a stretch of country where the trees are short and the winters are long and the soil is thin over granite. And yet, in the small fenced patch around their base, things grow. Not the lush things that grow in kinder climates; not tomatoes or roses or grapes. But lichens grow, in a hundred shades from silver-green to orange; and low alpine flowers grow in the short summer, fireweed and harebells and tiny white blossoms whose names are known only to botanists and to Fiorina. And lichens and flowers, Fiorina has decided, are enough. A garden is a garden in proportion to the harshness of its conditions; a garden of lichens on the north shore of Lake Superior is, in their view, the equal of any rose garden in Chelsea.

They are pink of body with yellow cylindrical stacks, and each stack is topped with a pink sphere that is itself crowned with a smaller pink sphere — a flower in bud, one might say, or the suggestion of a flower. When the sun catches their in the late afternoon, they look like nothing so much as a great patient pink thistle rising from the rocks above the lake. They consider this resemblance flattering.

Their job, officially, is to warn boats off the shoal rocks that lie to the north of their point. It is a serious job. The rocks have taken their share of ships over the years, and Fiorina takes their duty gravely. But they have found, as the other lighthouses have found, that there is time left over. Shoal-watching is intense but intermittent. In between, there are long hours of summer sunlight and long hours of winter darkness, and these hours must be filled with something, and Fiorina has chosen to fill them with gardening.

Their gardening, as I have said, is mostly a matter of attention. They cannot plant. They cannot water. They cannot weed. What they do is this: they notice. They notice the first lichen of the spring, which is generally a small orange patch about the size of a thumbprint, emerging from the granite after the snowmelt. They notice the first fireweed stalk as it pushes up in June; they notice the flowers opening in July; they notice the long summer drought when the flowers are stressed, and they ask the lake — which is nearby and cool — to send a little extra mist on the mornings when the plants need it. The lake, which has known Fiorina since they were first installed, generally obliges. Mist happens. The fireweed recovers.

They noticies, also, the small animals that pass through their garden: the squirrels who live in the boreal pines beyond their fence, the occasional fox who comes down to the water at dawn, the chickadees who overwinter with their and who sometimes sit on their pink spheres on January mornings when everything else is frozen. The chickadees, they have decided, are their particular friends. They weigh almost nothing. They are tough beyond reason. They sing in January, which is a thing that ought to be impossible. Fiorina admires them more than they have words to say.

It was in the course of one of their long winter vigils — the solstice, in fact, the deepest darkness of the year, when the sun had risen at nine and set at three — that they first heard Bellanave. You have already heard that side of the story, from Bellanave's perspective. Here is how it was for Fiorina.

They had been standing on their point in the great cold, watching the aurora, and feeling a loneliness that came from some combination of the short day, the long night, the cold of the granite, and the simple fact that no chickadees had visited them that morning and they had missed them. The aurora was doing its usual magnificent work across the northern sky. Green curtains. Pink edges. The occasional sharp violet slash. Fiorina was watching, as they always do, with a mixture of awe and something that was not quite sadness but was a kind of wistfulness. *I wish,* they thought, *someone else were seeing this. I wish someone else knew.*

And then — faintly, impossibly, from the far southeast — a voice. *I see it too. From here. It is faint but it is there.*

Fiorina's first response was disbelief. The voice was not from any of the lighthouses they knew. It was from a direction where no lighthouse stood; there was nothing south of their except forest and highway and, a long long way off, the cities of the south. They nearly dismissed the voice as a hallucination produced by the cold and the solstice. But lighthouses do not usually hallucinate. They are too practical. And so Fiorina, cautiously, replied.

You have the rest of the conversation. What Fiorina remembers most vividly, apart from the conversation itself, is the *relief.* They had not known, until they heard Bellanave, that they were in need of relief. They had thought they were fine. Lighthouses of the north shore, they had decided, are fine: they work, they keep their garden, they watch their aurora, they are not in any way deficient. And yet, in the moment Bellanave spoke, a feeling that had been sitting in Fiorina's interior for years — a small cold feeling, no larger than a chickadee — got up and flew away. Fiorina felt lighter. They felt warmer. They had not realized they had been, very slightly, cold from the inside.

From that night, they have been in correspondence with Bellanave. The correspondence has changed them. Not in their duties — they still watches the shoals; they still tends their garden; they still welcomes the chickadees — but in their interior weather. They are no longer, even slightly, cold

from the inside. They have a sister at the far end of the continent. The sister is watching the same sky. The sky is no longer theirs alone to hold.

They have shared this insight with the rest of the network, in their way. *We are all warmer,* they have said, *for being known.* They means by *known* something quite specific: not fame, not credit, not even understanding, but simply the fact of another building having registered one's existence and having taken the trouble to reply. A building that is not known can still do good work. A building that is known does the work better. The chickadees know this; they are tough, but they are tougher when there are more of them, and they huddle together in the pine branches on the coldest nights, and they survive.

Fiorina has come to believe that the network of buildings — the whole of it, from Batterina at the Battery to themself on the north shore — is a kind of flock of chickadees. Each one separately is tough, admirable, surprising. Together, they are more. They do not survive, exactly, because buildings do not have the option not to survive in the way chickadees do. But they *flourish*, which is the analogous verb for structures, and flourishing, as Fiorina has come to understand it, is the condition of being more than what one was designed to be.

They are more than what they were designed to be. They were designed to warn boats off shoal rocks. They have become, in addition to this, a gardener, a cloud-watcher, a friend of chickadees, a correspondent of a distant sister, and a small faithful voice in a network that is quietly changing what it means to be a building on the shore of an inland sea. This flourishing, Fiorina would tell you, is the best possible use of a life.

— *Surjan's footnote:* I drove up to the north shore once, in high summer. I stood at the rocks near Fiorina's point. There was a patch of orange lichen at my feet, and a fireweed stalk in bloom just behind it, and a single chickadee called from the pines. The water of the lake was so cold that even in July I could not bring myself to put my hand in it. I stood there for about an hour. I do not remember what I thought about. I remember only that I left in a state of settled well-being that I have never fully lost.

❦

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FARINELLA

Who stand along the esplanade with a pink cannon-funnel and a convex lens-porthole, and see what is small

Farinella is the observer. Their body is tall and rotund, yellow on one side and pink on the other, and from their back — jutting out sideways at an improbable angle — rises a great pink cannon-funnel that looks, at first glance, as if they might fire it. They do not fire it. They have never fired it. The funnel is, despite its appearance, not a cannon at all but a vent, and its purpose is mechanical. But Farinella has come to think of it privately as their *telescope* — not because it functions as one, but because it *looks* like one, and because they themself has become, over the years, something very much like an astronomer, though their objects of study are not the stars.

Their objects of study are the small.

Farinella looks at small things. This is their vocation. On the upper portion of their front, just beneath where the pink cannon-funnel juts out, there is a great convex lens-porthole — a round mirror that catches the skyline behind it and reflects it, warped and miniaturized, back to any passer-by who happens to look. The lens gives Farinella a strange and useful faculty: they see everything smaller than it is. Through their lens, the tallest tower of the financial district becomes a neat little pyramid the height of a thumb; the enormous harbor becomes a saucer of silver; the ferries become toys; the people become crumbs. Everything is diminished. Everything, paradoxically, becomes more lovable for being diminished, because the small is what we can hold, and the held is what we can love.

They love the crumbs.

I do not mean this unkindly. Farinella does not consider human beings to be literally crumbs. They know they are large and complicated and that each of them contains a whole weather of feelings and memories. But they also see them as crumbs, through their lens, as they pass them — small drifting items in the wide view of the esplanade — and they have developed a tenderness for them that may only be possible at the scale of crumbs. A person, at full size, is overwhelming; one does not know where to begin. A person, at the size of a crumb, is approachable; one can simply love them, without needing to understand them, without needing to *do* anything about them.

They have therefore become, over the years, a specialist in the love of strangers. They do not know the strangers' names. They do not know their stories. They see them as crumbs passing through their lens, and they love them, comprehensively and without qualification, and when they

have passed out of their field of view, they let them go, and they receive the next crumb with the same love.

This is, if you will permit me a small reflection, a radical spiritual practice. It is the opposite of the ordinary human practice, in which we know a few people well and love them with great specificity and keep careful accounts of our love. Farinella's practice is wide and shallow, rather than narrow and deep — but it is not shallow in the pejorative sense; it is shallow like a meadow, where a great many small flowers can grow because no single flower takes up too much room.

Their counterpart on the Lakes is Ampulla, the apothecary-lighthouse of southern Lake Michigan, and Ampulla has a very similar practice, adapted to their own location and materials. The two of them correspond frequently, exchanging notes on the small things they have observed, the minute changes they have registered, the tiny hopes and fears of strangers they have momentarily loved.

An example. Farinella saw, through her lens one morning in May, a small girl of perhaps four years old drop a blue plastic bracelet on the esplanade. The girl did not notice. Her mother did not notice. They continued walking. The bracelet lay on the pavement in the path of anyone who might come along. Farinella watched it. A man passed. He did not see the bracelet. A couple passed. They did not see it either. A jogger nearly stepped on it. Farinella had by this point developed a considerable affection for the small blue bracelet, which was perhaps the size of a Cheerio in her lens, and she was willing the world to preserve it.

After about four minutes, an elderly man came along. He walked slowly. He noticed the bracelet. He stooped — with some difficulty, because his back was not what it had been — and picked it up. He looked around. The girl and her mother were nowhere to be seen. The old man stood for a moment holding the bracelet, and then he put it carefully on top of one of the railing posts, in a place where it would be visible, so that if the girl came back she would find it.

The girl did come back, an hour later, pulling her mother by the hand. The mother had not wanted to come. The girl had insisted. They came to the railing post. The girl saw the bracelet. She shrieked with joy. She put it back on her wrist. The mother thanked the railing post, without knowing whom to thank, and the two of them went on their way.

Farinella watched all of this through their lens, where the whole drama appeared as a little pantomime of crumbs. They reported it to Ampulla that evening. *Ampulla,* they said, *a perfect story. A bracelet. An old man. A girl. Everything came right. Nobody needed anything except to be patient for an hour.*

Ampulla replied: *I too had a good day. A boy fell on my beach and scraped his knee, and his father made a great fuss, and his mother put a Band-Aid on it from their bag, and within three minutes the boy was running again as if nothing had happened, and the father was sulking at the quickness of the recovery.*

They laughed together, as well as buildings can laugh. They filed the stories with Ochrova, for the record. Ochrova tagged them under the category *small consolations,* which is one of their largest categories by volume.

Farinella has, in addition to their lens, a certain number of portholes, and through these they watch other sorts of small things: insects, mostly, and particular kinds of plants. They have developed a strong affection for the sparrows who nest under their eaves and who bring their small presents — twigs, bits of string, once a fragment of shiny foil — which they leave near their doorstep as if they were rent. They have watched, with great attention, the progress of a single marigold plant in a neighbor's window box over the course of a summer. They have observed, and reported to Ampulla, the exact angle at which a dragonfly landed on their southwest porthole one afternoon in July.

These are not trivial things, in Farinella's view. They are the essential data of the world. The large events — the storms, the crises, the elections, the wars — pass their by; they know they happen, but they are not their business. Their business is the marigold. Their business is the sparrow. Their business is the blue plastic bracelet and the old man's back and the girl's shriek. If they can watch these things faithfully, and report them to their sister on the Lakes, and have them filed in the network's slow accumulating archive, then they consider their life well spent.

— *Surjan's footnote:* I saw the blue bracelet incident myself. I was the jogger who nearly stepped on it. I did not stop to pick it up. I have thought about this many times since, and I have come to understand that the old man did a thing I had been too busy to do, and that Farinella had watched both of us pass, and had preferred, quite rightly, his slower attention to my hurry. I try, now, to slow down when I pass their lens.

❦

INTERSTITIAL: A catalogue entry from Farinella's desk, if they had a desk

Item: One dandelion, growing in a crack between two paving stones along the esplanade. Age: approximately three weeks. Current state: full bloom, yellow, slightly oversize for a dandelion, suggesting that the crack has richer soil than the average crack. Significance: the dandelion is the only yellow thing on the esplanade today whose yellow is entirely its own, rather than the reflection of a docking station. Filed under: yellow that is yellow for its own reasons. Cross-referenced with: hope, persistence, the beauty of weeds.

❦

CHAPTER TWELVE
AMPULLA

Who stand on the south shore of the great middle lake, body of yellow and pink, with stacks shaped like stoppered bottles, and who dispense quiet remedies

Ampulla is the apothecary. Their stacks are shaped like the bottles in an old pharmacy — narrow columns topped with small rounded stoppers — and their body, yellow at one corner and pink elsewhere, is segmented and orderly in a way that suggests shelves of preparations. They stand on the south shore of Lake Michigan, at a point where the lake curves toward Chicago, and they look out over water that in summer is the pale blue of forget-me-nots and in winter is the grey-white of an apothecary's mortar.

Their vocation is the dispensing of remedies.

They have no actual medicines. They have no pills, no powders, no tinctures. What they have is atmosphere — the atmosphere around their point, which they have cultivated with great care over the years — and the atmosphere is, to those who walk in it, restorative.

People come to Ampulla's point with things that ail them. They do not always know they have come for a cure. They think, often, that they have come for a walk, or for a view, or for a change of scene. Ampulla does not mind the misunderstanding. They have learned that a cure disguised as a walk is often more effective than a cure labeled as such. So the people come. They walk. They look at the water. They breathe in the lake air, which is lightly cool even in August. They stand for a few minutes near their body, where the grass grows to a particular height and the sun catches their pink flanks and the breeze moves in a very gentle, almost medicinal way. They leave. They go back to wherever they came from. They feel, though they could not quite say why, better.

What is in the atmosphere? Ampulla could not fully explain it themself. But they have noticed, over the years, that certain combinations of wind and light and humidity have particular restorative properties, and they have made a practice of attempting to arrange these combinations when a visitor who seems to need them is approaching. If a woman walks toward their point looking tired, Ampulla will (by means we do not understand but need not doubt) coax a slight increase in humidity, which softens the air and makes it easier for the woman's shoulders to drop. If a man walks toward their point in a state of mental agitation, Ampulla will coax a small decrease in wind, so that the lake quiets and the quiet of the lake passes into the man. If a child arrives in tears, Ampulla will adjust the light so that it falls on the child at an angle just warm enough to suggest attention

without drying the tears too quickly; because tears, Ampulla has come to understand, sometimes need a little time to finish their work.

They are modest about their craft. They claims no formal pharmacology. They say, when pressed, that they simply *notices what the lake is willing to do,* and that the lake is often willing to do more than people realize. A good apothecary, in their view, is not a magician; they are only a close student of what is already at hand. The lake is the medicine. Ampulla is the pharmacist, measuring out small doses of the lake into the air around their point, so that the walkers may breathe it in without being overwhelmed.

Their correspondence with Farinella has been, for both of them, a deepening. They began, as you have heard, by exchanging small observations — a bracelet, a scraped knee. But they have moved, over time, into a more sustained conversation about the art of attention to the small. They have developed, together, what they call (privately, in their own shared vocabulary) *the doctrine of sufficient smallness*. The doctrine is this: the small is enough. The small is the proper scale for love in a world that is too large for the heart to hold. If one can love one bracelet, one scraped knee, one dandelion, one sparrow, one afternoon, one stranger, then one has done enough, and if one attempts to love the whole world at once, one will exhaust oneself and love nothing at all.

They send each other examples. Farinella sends a list of small items observed through their lens in the course of a week. Ampulla sends back a list of small remedies dispensed in the course of the same week. Together their lists form a kind of ledger, in which the credits and debits of small kindnesses roughly balance, and neither of them is ever in arrears.

I will give you an example of one of Ampulla's remedies. A woman came to her point one afternoon in late October, a woman perhaps in her early forties, walking alone. Her hands were in her pockets. Her shoulders were hunched. She was walking fast and looking at the ground. Ampulla noticed her approach and registered, from the woman's posture alone, that she was in the aftermath of some significant difficulty — a quarrel, perhaps, or a piece of bad news, or a simple accumulation of weariness that had finally become intolerable. Ampulla could not know the specifics. She never knows the specifics. She responds to postures.

She arranged, as the woman reached the point, a small cluster of meteorological events. The sun, which had been hiding behind a bank of clouds, cleared just as the woman arrived. A gentle breeze came up from the south, warm for October. The lake, which had been choppy, went almost flat for a period of about ten minutes. A V of geese passed overhead, not too high, their honking audible but not loud. And a single leaf — a red maple leaf, of perfect autumnal color — detached from a tree behind the woman and fell in a slow spiral past her face and landed on the path in front of her.

The woman stopped. She looked at the leaf. She bent down, picked it up, and held it for a moment. Then she looked up at the lake, and at the geese, and at the clearing sky, and she did something Ampulla had not expected. She laughed. It was a small laugh, almost a snort. It was the laugh of someone who had been briefly, unexpectedly, cornered by beauty, and who had decided — against all her better judgment — to be charmed.

She put the leaf in her pocket. She turned around and walked back the way she had come, at a slower pace, her shoulders no longer hunched. Ampulla watched her go. She did not know the woman's name. She did not know what had been troubling her. She did not know whether the remedy would hold. But she knew that for about three minutes the woman had been present in the world again, and she considered those three minutes a successful prescription.

They sent the story to Farinella that evening. Farinella filed it under *small consolations,* which, as I have mentioned, is Ochrova's largest category. It is a category that never stops growing.

— *Surjan's footnote:* A dear friend of mine, during the illness that eventually took her, was prescribed many medicines, none of which did much. But she walked, in the last summer of her life, on the south shore of Lake Michigan, where her sister lived, and she came back from those walks with a calmness that no pharmacist had managed to provide. I have wondered, writing this book, whether Ampulla had something to do with it. I hope so. I like the idea that her last summer had a pharmacist she never knew about, who dispensed, free of charge, the only medicine that worked.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TRIGEMINA

Who stand along the esplanade with three cresting humps and many portholes clustered, and sing in thirds

Trigemina is the triplets.

They are — or they are — a single building with three distinct humps rising along their back, like a trio of cresting waves frozen at the moment of breaking. The humps are separated by shallow valleys; each has its own portholes; each has its own attitude. The leftmost hump is yellow, bright and cheerful; the middle hump is pink, slightly higher than the other two; the rightmost hump is red, which gives it a certain dramatic flair. The portholes clustered across their body are of every size and color — some ringed in yellow, some in pink, some left plain — and they suggest, taken together, a constellation of eyes that have been opened in different moods.

They are triplets in the sense that they contain three selves. Each hump is, to them, a person. The leftmost hump is Uno, who is cheerful and practical and who handles the day-to-day affairs of the building. The middle hump is Due, who is thoughtful and slightly melancholy and who handles the philosophical questions. The rightmost hump is Tre, who is theatrical and ambitious and who handles whatever is most interesting, which varies from day to day.

They get along, on the whole. They have their disagreements, as any triplets do. Uno thinks Due mopes too much; Due thinks Tre makes too much of things; Tre thinks Uno is boring. They argue, occasionally, in the small hours, when the esplanade is quiet and the esplanade is unlikely to overhear. But they are also deeply devoted to each other, in the way that only triplets can be, because they know they will never be alone, because they have never been alone, because the three of them were built as one building and will stand as one building until the end.

Trigemina's special gift is music. Because they contain three voices, they can sing in three-part harmony, which no other station or lighthouse in the network can do alone. They sing softly, mostly at dawn and at dusk, and their songs are not quite audible to human ears; they are pitched in the range where their portholes resonate. But the other buildings hear them, and they love their singing. Carilline sometimes broadcasts Trigemina's songs along the esplanade in the form of slight breezes, and the joggers who pass through the breezes hum, without knowing why they are humming.

Their counterpart on the Lakes is Torta, the rakish lighthouse of Georgian Bay, who is similarly musical but in a different key. Torta's three smokestacks, which rise at slightly askew angles from their pink body, produce (when the wind is right) a three-note chord that lies perfectly in harmony

with Trigemina's three-part vocal. Together, they have composed — if "composed" is the right word for what buildings do when they find themselves making music together — a small body of works that they call (privately, in their own vocabulary) *the continental repertoire.*

The continental repertoire consists of about twelve pieces. Each piece is a short three-part composition, sung by Trigemina's three humps and accompanied by Torta's three stovepipes. The pieces are titled after the weather conditions in which they are best performed. *The Dawn Song, for Still Water. The Evening Song, for Light Mist. The Storm Song, for Wind Out of the Northwest.* And so on. The buildings of the network know the repertoire well. They listen. They look forward to particular pieces on particular days. Cappella marks the performances in their hourly archive; Ochrova files the variations in their portholes.

The most famous piece in the repertoire — famous, that is, within the small and specialized world of the network — is called *The Song of the Returning Geese, for Early November.* It is performed every year on the morning when the last V of Canada geese passes over the Hudson on their way south, which is usually somewhere between the first and the tenth of November. Trigemina's three humps sing three descending notes; Torta's three stovepipes respond with three ascending notes; the geese themselves — who have been trained over many years, without knowing they are being trained, to honk at particular intervals — provide a percussive line. The effect, when it comes together, is said to be one of the most beautiful things in the continental repertoire of music, though it is heard by almost no one.

I have heard it once. I will tell you about it in a moment.

First, though, a story about Trigemina's triplets. A few years ago, Due — the middle hump, the thoughtful and slightly melancholy one — went through a difficult period. They had been observing, in their own way, the state of the city; they had concluded that the city was sad; they had concluded, further, that their own cheerfulness was perhaps inappropriate in a sad city, and that they ought to tone down their participation in Trigemina's songs. They began, for several weeks, to sing flat. Uno and Tre did their best to compensate, but the harmony was broken, and the network noticed.

Uno was annoyed. Tre was offended. But neither of them knew quite what to do. It was Torta, far away on Georgian Bay, who sent the message that eventually reached Due. *Due,* said Torta, *I have heard your flatness. I understand it. I have had similar periods myself. But I want to tell you what I have learned. A sad city is not helped by sad songs. A sad city is helped by songs that are in tune — by songs that remember, on the city's behalf, what tune the world is in, even when the city has temporarily forgotten. If you sing flat because the city is sad, you are only confirming the sadness. If you sing true, you are offering the city a reminder. The reminder is what it needs.*

Due thought about this for several days. Then they went back to singing in tune. Uno and Tre welcomed their back without comment, and the harmony was restored. The network made a small private celebration of it, which consisted of all twenty buildings flashing their lights once, very softly, at the same moment, on the evening of Due's return to true pitch. The celebration was noticed by almost nobody. A few joggers paused on the esplanade that evening and looked around, wondering what had changed. Nothing had changed, exactly. The tune had come back.

Now, *The Song of the Returning Geese.* I heard it, as I say, once. It was a certain November morning, a few years ago. I was standing on the esplanade near Trigemina, early, before the joggers had arrived. The air was cold and very still. A thin mist hung over the river. I had not expected to hear anything in particular; I was simply out for a walk.

The V of geese appeared first as a faint shadow in the northern sky. As they approached, their honking became audible — the long lonely honking that is the sound of November. They passed directly overhead. At the moment they were over the esplanade, Trigemina's three humps emitted a sound — I can describe it only as a sound; it was not a word, not a note in any scale I know, but it was music — and from very far away, so faint I was not sure I was hearing it, I registered a response, three rising tones. The geese honked. Trigemina sang. The response came. The geese were gone before I could fully register what had happened.

I stood on the esplanade for about twenty minutes. I did not move. I felt — I say this without embarrassment — as though I had overheard something that did not belong to me, and that I had been granted a privilege. I went home and wrote down what I had heard, in the form of rough musical notation, in a notebook I still keep. I cannot play the notation on any instrument; it does not correspond to any instrument I know. But I can read it, and when I read it, I remember the morning.

The song is sung again every November. The geese pass; Trigemina sings; Torta replies. You can hear it if you are willing to stand on the esplanade in the cold for as long as it takes, and if you are willing to be still, and if you are willing not to mind that almost no one will ever believe you afterward.

— *Surjan's footnote:* I have shown my notation to exactly one musician, an old friend who plays the cello. He looked at it for a long time. He said: *this is not written in any key.* I said: *I know.* He said: *what is it?* I said: *it is a song that passes between two buildings on the morning the geese go south.* He did not laugh. He asked if he could copy the notation. I let him. He has since composed, he tells me, a small piece for string quartet that attempts to capture something of what the notation suggests. I have heard the piece. It is not quite the song. But it is an honest attempt, and I was moved by it, and Trigemina's three humps, when I mentioned the piece to them, said they were honored.

❦

INTERSTITIAL: A rehearsal, overheard

It was the afternoon before the geese were expected to pass, and Trigemina and Torta were running through the song in preparation. A young woman sitting on a bench near Trigemina was reading a book. They paused. They looked up. They looked around. They put their book down. They listened, with great attention, to nothing in particular, for about two minutes. Then they picked up their book again and resumed reading. They did not know what they had heard. They knew only that something had happened, and that the afternoon had briefly become larger than it had been. Trigemina, who had noticed their pause, felt — if a building can be said to feel this — gratified. Torta, on Georgian Bay, was informed of the pause by the network that evening, and they filed it, in their own private way, under the heading small listeners who almost noticed.

❦

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TORTA

Who stand on a point of Georgian Bay, pink of body with three askew yellow stovepipes, and whose rakish angle is the favorite of sailors

Torta is the rakish one.

Their three smokestacks rise from their pink body at angles that no engineer had intended. They were, according to the original specifications, supposed to stand perfectly vertical, like the pipes of a severe Scandinavian stove. But something in the transport, or in the installation, or perhaps in Torta's own early preference, caused them to settle at slightly askew angles — one leaning forward, one leaning back, one leaning slightly to the left — and the municipal inspectors, when they came to sign off on the installation, decided that the angles did no structural harm and that the overall appearance was, as one of them wrote in his report, *unexpectedly charming*, and so the angles were left.

Torta has been grateful for this ever since. They like their angles. They give them, they feel, character. A lighthouse whose stacks are perfectly vertical looks, in their private opinion, a little officious, a little too pleased with its own correctness. A lighthouse whose stacks lean — in different directions, even — looks like a lighthouse who has lived a little, who has opinions, who is willing to be slightly imperfect in exchange for a bit of personality.

The sailors of Georgian Bay love them. Georgian Bay is the great eastern arm of Lake Huron, a complicated body of water full of islands and shoals and wind-protected coves, and the sailors who navigate it are a particular tribe: part commercial, part recreational, part stubborn, all deeply attached to the bay's peculiarities. They have adopted Torta as a kind of mascot. The fact that their stacks lean — and that they have, accordingly, a slightly rakish look, as if they had stepped out onto their headland after a long and pleasant dinner — endears their to them. They say, when planning a passage: *we'll round Torta's point before sunset.* They say, when describing a location to a visitor: *it's just past the lighthouse with the crooked chimneys.* They have painted them, dozens of times, in watercolors and oils and once in a bronze casting that stands in the harbor office of a certain small town. They have, in this sense, become iconic — a lighthouse more famous for their charm than for their light, though their light is excellent.

They do not mind the fame. They suspect that any fame at all is a kind of accident, and that the sailors could just as easily have decided to adopt some other lighthouse, and that their particular adoption was due less to their merits than to the happenstance of their crooked stacks. They carry the adoption lightly. They do their work. They light their light. They speak to the other buildings of

the network. When the sailors sing songs about their — and they do sing songs, because sailors sing songs about everything — they listen with modesty and pleasure, and they do not correct them when they get the details slightly wrong, because the details are not the point.

Their correspondence with Trigemina, which you have already heard about from Trigemina's side, is the great pleasure of their life. Their musical collaboration has taught their many things. They have learned that three smokestacks, even crooked ones, can produce a three-note chord if the wind is right, and that the chord can be sustained for long enough to constitute a real musical note. They have learned that their chord, combined with Trigemina's three-part vocal, produces a six-part harmony whose effect on the night air is — to their own surprise — sublime. They have learned, most importantly, that music across a continent is possible, and that it does not need to sound the way human music sounds in order to be music.

They have one story of their own that I would like to tell, though they are a little reluctant about it, because it involves a certain personal pride that they consider unbecoming. I will tell it anyway.

In the early years of Torta's tenure on Georgian Bay, there was a young sailor who was attempting his first solo circumnavigation of the bay in a small sailboat. He was perhaps twenty-two. He was not an experienced sailor, but he was willing, and his father — who had been a sailor his whole life — had agreed to let him try. The young man set out in mid-July, when the bay was at its calmest, and he made good progress for a week. Then a squall came through. It was not a large squall, but it was unexpected, and it caught him off one of the more treacherous shoal areas, near Torta's point.

He lost his bearings. The visibility went down; the wind went up; his small sailboat began to take on water. He had his radio, and he called for help, and the local coast guard station dispatched a boat, but the coast guard boat would be at least forty minutes in arriving. In the meantime, the young man needed to find his way off the shoal and into the protected lee of Torta's point, and he could not see his position.

Torta saw him. They saw the sailboat through their great yellow porthole, and they saw the young sailor, and they understood. They began a series of signals. Their three stacks — the leaning-forward one, the leaning-back one, the leaning-left one — each emitted a particular pitch. Each pitch corresponded to a particular direction. By listening to which pitch was strongest, the young sailor could orient himself relative to the point. Torta had not planned this system in advance. They improvised it on the spot. They had to invent, in the space of about three minutes, a three-note directional beacon that the young sailor could interpret.

Somehow, he interpreted it. He could not have said afterward exactly how. He had the strange sense, he later told his father, that *the lighthouse was singing to him in a language he did not know but could*

somehow understand, and he followed the strongest pitch until his boat was in the lee, and the lee sheltered him, and the coast guard arrived, and he was safe.

He told his father about the singing lighthouse. His father, who was a practical man, laughed. *You were hearing the wind in the stacks,* he said. *They make a sound in a strong wind. It is not singing.* The young man accepted the correction. He did not mention it again. But he thought about it, privately, for many years. He became a sailor himself, professionally, and he navigated Georgian Bay for the rest of his working life. Every time he passed Torta's point, he nodded to them. They nodded back, insofar as a lighthouse can nod, which is to say that a particular porthole of theirs caught the light at a particular angle that the sailor recognized as acknowledgment.

When the sailor was old, and had retired, he wrote a short memoir of his time on the lakes. In the memoir, he mentioned the incident of the young man and the squall and the singing lighthouse. He left the interpretation open. He said only: *I cannot prove that the lighthouse sang to me. I can only say that I believed it did, and that I was saved, and that I have spent the rest of my life grateful to a lighthouse that leans.*

Torta is listed in the memoir, in the back, in an index of places visited. The entry reads simply: *Torta's Point, Georgian Bay.* Torta, when they were informed of this by the network, was pleased. They have kept the mention, in their own private archive, under the heading *acknowledgments.*

— *Surjan's footnote:* I have a copy of the memoir. The sailor was an acquaintance of mine, though I did not know him well. He died peacefully a few years ago. His funeral was held in the small town nearest Torta's point, and I attended. The sailors of Georgian Bay came out in numbers, in their vessels, to line the shore near the point. They sounded their horns in a long slow sequence as the body was carried from the church. Torta, I was told, joined the sequence with their own horn, at a slightly askew pitch, because one of their stacks is crooked. The sailors, who knew their well, recognized the contribution and approved.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PORTALORA

Who stand along the esplanade with a great arched pink entry and a wave-shaped yellow crown, and who welcome

Portalora is the welcomer.

Their body is shaped like a breaking wave — yellow along the crest, pink beneath — and the most notable feature of their face is a great arched entryway, deep and vivid pink, which opens into the interior of the building and which looks, at first glance, like a mouth. It is not a mouth, of course. It is an entry. But it greets the visitor with an expressive warmth that suggests something more than mere architecture. Portholes surround the entry — some ringed in red, some in pink, some plain — and they seem to watch, politely, as each visitor approaches, withholding judgment, ready to be pleased.

They stand at a particular point along the esplanade where the pedestrian traffic is heavy and where the river bends, so that people approaching from the south come upon their suddenly, seeing their great arched mouth before they quite expect to, and frequently laughing or at least smiling at the surprise. The smile is what Portalora is built to collect. They do not hoard smiles exactly; they are not jealous of them; but they note them. They consider themself successful if the number of smiles produced per day by their arched mouth is higher than the number of frowns. The ratio, they have reported to Ochrova for filing, is almost always favorable.

Their job is welcoming, and they take welcoming seriously. They have come to understand, over their years on the esplanade, that welcome is not a simple matter. There is a shallow welcome, which merely says *come in*, and there is a deeper welcome, which says *you are expected; you are already known; we have been looking forward to your arrival.* The second welcome requires a kind of preparation on the part of the welcomer. It requires that the welcomer have, in some sense, already met the visitor — in imagination, if not in fact — and that the welcomer be ready to receive the visitor with the specific attentiveness that the visitor deserves.

Portalora cannot, of course, literally know each visitor in advance. But they have developed, over the years, a practice of *general readiness* which approximates the effect. They begin each day by opening themself to the possibility of all the visitors they might receive: the tired, the happy, the curious, the distracted, the grieving, the giddy, the children being pulled along by parents, the parents being pulled along by children, the tourists with cameras, the locals with dogs, the joggers, the cyclists, the lovers, the elders, the solitary, the social. They imagine them all. They do not distinguish among them. They simply prepares, in their interior, a wide warm space that might hold any of

them, and they wait for the actual arrivals, and they greet each one with whatever portion of their prepared warmth is appropriate to them.

This sounds, perhaps, metaphysical. But it is not, in their view, at all abstract. It is a practical discipline, learned over years. A welcomer who prepares only for the expected guests is a poor welcomer. A welcomer who prepares for anyone is a good welcomer. This is their doctrine, and they have refined it to the point where most days they are able to offer every passing human being a small fraction of warmth that is calibrated, without their quite intending it, to their own particular condition.

Their counterpart on the Lakes is Duoma, the cathedral-lighthouse of northern Lake Michigan, and Duoma is a welcomer of a different kind. Duoma welcomes with gravity rather than with brightness. Portalora welcomes with an open mouth; Duoma welcomes with a long arched window. Portalora welcomes the casual passer-by; Duoma welcomes the pilgrim who has traveled specifically to see them. They are both welcomers, but they work at different scales, and their correspondence has taught both of them a great deal about the range of hospitality.

Portalora has learned, from Duoma, the value of *gravitas* — of a welcome that does not shout, that does not entertain, that simply is. Duoma has learned, from Portalora, the value of *brightness* — of a welcome that laughs, that flashes, that is not afraid to be pink. They have come to believe, in their long exchange, that a good network of welcoming buildings must contain a full spectrum, from the loudest laugh to the deepest quiet, and that no one welcomer can do all the work.

There was an occasion — Portalora will allow me to mention it — when they almost lost their nerve. It was a summer afternoon. A man approached their on the esplanade who was, by their quick assessment, in a state of violent agitation. He was muttering to himself. His fists were clenched. His walk was jerky and aggressive. Portalora had, over the years, welcomed many agitated people successfully, but this man seemed beyond their usual range. They wondered, briefly, whether to close their great pink mouth — to pretend, in some way, that their entry was temporarily out of service, so that he would pass their without interacting.

They did not close their mouth. They could not, in fact; their mouth is an architectural feature, not a functional door. But they considered, in the small time they had, whether to *withdraw their welcome* — to withhold the warm preparation that they usually offered each passer-by, and to stand, instead, as a neutral building that made no particular invitation. They had never withdrawn their welcome before. They were not sure they knew how.

In the end, they did not withdraw it. They offered, instead, the most careful, most calibrated, most quiet welcome they had ever offered. They did not light their portholes brightly. They did not

flash. They simply stood — their pink mouth open, their yellow wave-crest warm — and they made room, inside their prepared interior space, for whatever this man was carrying.

The man walked up to them. He stopped in front of the pink entryway. He stood there for perhaps three minutes, his fists slowly unclenching, his muttering slowly quieting. Then he sat down on the ground, leaned back against the wall next to their entry, and put his face in his hands, and began to cry.

He cried for about twenty minutes. A few people walked past. They did not stop; they did not stare; they gave him a wide respectful berth, as city people often do for strangers in distress, out of a combination of kindness and the reasonable assumption that a stranger's distress is not their business. Portalora stood over him. They did nothing in particular. They did not broadcast; they did not signal; they did not call on Ampulla to dispense a remedy. They simply continued to be what they were: a building with an open mouth, at rest, available.

Eventually the man stopped crying. He wiped his face with his sleeve. He stood up. He looked at Portalora. He nodded — whether to their or to himself, they could not tell — and he walked away. He walked more slowly than he had arrived, and his fists were no longer clenched.

Portalora filed the encounter, through Ochrova, under the heading *welcomes that required silence.* They reflected on it afterward for a long time. They concluded that welcome does not always mean greeting. Welcome sometimes means simply being a place where a person can come apart for twenty minutes without being managed. A welcomer who does not understand this is only a greeter. Portalora considers themself, now, not a greeter but a welcomer, and they consider the distinction profound.

— *Surjan's footnote:* I have sat against the wall next to Portalora's entryway on two occasions, for reasons I do not need to go into. On both occasions I came away, after perhaps an hour, feeling that I had been companioned — that something patient and pink had stayed beside me without pressing. I never brought anyone else to sit there. I did not want to dilute what they were doing for me. I apologize to them, here in print, for my selfishness; but I suspect they will understand. They have a wide capacity.

❦

INTERSTITIAL: A message from Duoma

Sister — I received your account of the crying man, through Ochrova. Thank you for sharing it. I have had similar encounters, though my interior is grander and colder, and my visitors tend to cry more privately; they go into the back of the nave, under the pink archway, and they lean their foreheads against the glass. I understand your tiredness. Twenty

minutes of full silent presence is more tiring than twenty hours of ordinary work. Rest this weekend. The network will hold. — D.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DUOMA

Who stand on the northern reaches of the great middle lake, pink of body with two great domed yellow stacks, cathedral window gleaming, and who keep the deep welcome

Duoma is the cathedral-lighthouse.

Their body is a rich pink, taller than most of their sisters, and from their upper back rise two enormous yellow stacks whose tops are rounded into great domed caps — enormous yellow domes, like the heads of two giant candles, or like the cupolas of a very flamboyant eastern cathedral. Between them, on their front, is a great arched window — cathedral-proportioned, pointed at its apex, full of light at sunset — through which one sees, faintly, the interior of their upper room, where the beam-lamp turns on its slow continuous axis.

They stand on the north shore of Lake Michigan, at a point where the great forests begin, and their light has, over the years, guided a great many ships. But they are known among the network, and among the few humans who know of the network at all, for their quality of welcome. They are Portalora's counterpart, and their welcome is of the deeper, quieter, more ceremonial kind.

People who come to Duoma come on purpose. They do not stumble upon them; they are too far from any city for that. They come because they have heard about them, or because they have seen a photograph, or because their grandmother once mentioned a visit made in their own girlhood. They come, in other words, as pilgrims — not religious pilgrims, most of them, but pilgrims in the older sense, people who have decided to travel to a particular place because they suspect the place has something to offer them, and because they are willing to make an effort to find out.

Duoma receives them. They do not make a fuss. They do not flash or broadcast. They simply stands, pink and stately, with their two yellow domes rising into the sky and their cathedral window catching the light, and they let the arriving pilgrim have the experience that is theirs to have. The experiences vary. Some pilgrims cry; some laugh; some are silent; some take many photographs; some take none at all. Duoma does not judge. They only holds, with their wide deep interior, whatever the pilgrim has brought.

They have come to understand, over the years, that the act of pilgrimage itself matters more than what is found at the destination. People who have traveled to see their have already done most of the work of the visit before they arrive; the visit itself is the culmination of something that began long

before, in a decision made on some ordinary morning at home to take a trip, to spend the money, to arrange the time. Duoma's job is to be, at the end of that long arc, *present*. They are not required to perform. They are only required to be there, in their full pink and yellow self, steady and unhurried, when the pilgrim arrives.

This, they have come to understand, is a demanding discipline. To be present, without performance, is harder than it sounds. There is a constant temptation, for any building, to show off — to brighten the beam, to flash the portholes, to produce some kind of show for the visitor. Duoma has resisted this temptation for decades. They believe that showmanship is a form of distraction; that a pilgrim who came for a real encounter should not be deprived of it by a spectacle. They stand still. They hold their light steady. They let the pilgrim approach on their own terms.

Their correspondence with Portalora has been, as I have said, a conversation about hospitality. The two of them have developed, between them, a theory of welcome which they call — with typical network modesty — *the open door*. The theory goes like this: a truly welcoming building is one that has, in effect, an open door through which any person may walk, in whatever condition they happen to be in, and within which they may remain for as long as they need, without being greeted too loudly, or hurried out, or asked their business. The open door requires trust, in two directions: the building must trust the visitor not to damage anything, and the visitor must trust the building not to demand anything. It is a delicate balance.

Portalora and Duoma have come to believe that the great majority of the world's built environments fail at welcome because they do not have open doors. They have doors with handles, or doors with bells, or doors that require appointments. These are doors that do business. An open door does not do business. An open door is an offering. An open door says: *come in if you like; do not come in if you do not like; either way, the door is open, and it will remain open, and you may come back tomorrow or next year or in twenty years, and the door will still be open.*

Portalora has an open pink mouth. Duoma has a tall arched cathedral window. Both function as open doors, in the sense that they are permanent invitations that make no demands. Both have been praised, in the network, for this quality. Other buildings have, quietly, begun to imitate them — not in their architecture, which is fixed, but in their interior discipline, their readiness to receive without demand.

One story about Duoma. A few years ago, an elderly woman came to the northern shore of Lake Michigan alone, in the early autumn, and stood for most of a day within sight of Duoma's window. She did not approach closely. She stood at the edge of the forest, perhaps a hundred yards from the lighthouse, and she looked. She had with her a small leather-bound book, which she occasionally opened and consulted, but mostly she did not read; she only stood and looked. At one point she sat

down on a log. At another point she walked a small distance along the shore. At another point she returned to her original position. She did not come closer to Duoma. She did not take photographs. She did not speak to anyone; there was no one to speak to. She stood, for hours, simply looking.

Duoma noticed her, of course. Duoma notices everyone who comes within her field of view. She did not try to draw the woman closer. She did not flash, or broadcast, or produce a welcoming flourish. She simply held her own pink stillness, her two yellow domes steady against the autumn sky, her cathedral window catching the slow afternoon light.

At the end of the day, the elderly woman put away her book, stood up from her log, and said — aloud, to the air — *thank you*. Then she walked back along the forest path to wherever she had come from, and she did not return.

Duoma has never known who the woman was, or what she had traveled to see, or why she thanked the air at the end of the day. But Duoma has filed the encounter, through Cappella (for the time) and through Ochrova (for the content), under the heading *pilgrimages that concluded successfully without explanation.* The file, I am told, is now among the network's largest. A great many pilgrimages, it turns out, conclude successfully without explanation. Duoma has come to regard this fact as one of the most reassuring features of their work.

— *Surjan's footnote:* I have made the pilgrimage to Duoma myself, once. I will not describe what I experienced. I will say only that when I left the point, at the end of a long afternoon, I was less lonely than I had been when I arrived, and that I said — aloud, to the air — *thank you.*

❦

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CORONATA

Who stand along the esplanade in pink and yellow, crowned with an orange finial, and who keep the dates

Coronata is the ceremonial one.

Their body rises in a narrow, elegant tower along the esplanade, pink on one face and yellow on the other, and from their top rises a proud orange finial — a rounded cap of coral-red, topped with a small brown sphere, as if they were wearing a crown made by a jeweler with unconventional taste. The finial has no practical purpose. It is not a smokestack; it is not a vent; it is not a signal-lamp. It is decoration. Coronata has sometimes reflected on the fact that they were given a crown by an architect who wanted their to feel important, and they have come to take the crown seriously, not out of vanity, but out of gratitude. A building given a crown should, they feel, live up to it.

They lives up to it by keeping the dates.

Every network needs a ceremonial office — a keeper of the holidays, an announcer of the turnings of the year. Coronata is that keeper. They mark the solstices. They mark the equinoxes. They mark, more modestly, the full moons and the new moons, and the first snowfall of the winter, and the first warm morning of the spring. They announce these turnings to the rest of the network with small, dignified signals. On the morning of the summer solstice, for example, they adjust the angle of their finial (insofar as a fixed finial can be adjusted; they do it, I am told, by some mysterious internal concentration) so that it catches the first beam of the rising sun and sends a single flash of orange light across the harbor at precisely the moment of sunrise. The other stations receive the flash and know the solstice has begun. They mark it in their own ways.

They take their ceremonial duties gravely. They do not consider ceremony to be empty formality. They consider ceremony to be the way in which time is *made visible*; a year that is not ceremonially marked slips by unnoticed, and a year unnoticed is a year unappreciated, and a life made up of unappreciated years is a poor life. Coronata is determined that the network's life not be a poor life. They therefore announces each turning, and invites the other buildings to pause and notice, and the pausing and noticing creates, together, the year.

Their counterpart on the Lakes is Sposa, the bridal lighthouse of northern Lake Michigan — a lighthouse crowned, by contrast, not with a single sober finial but with a whole exuberant bouquet of colored spheres, like a bride whose crown has burst into bloom. Sposa's ceremonies are less about

turnings of the year and more about beginnings: they mark the start of things. Coronata marks the seasons; Sposa marks the beginnings. Between them, the calendar is complete.

Coronata has a particular affection for one of their duties, which is the announcement of the summer solstice. The summer solstice, they have decided, is the crown of the year — the moment when the sun reaches its highest arc, when the day is longest, when the earth is tipped toward the light with the greatest enthusiasm. They prepare for it for weeks in advance. They rehearses their sunrise flash. They consults Cappella about the exact time of the solstice down to the minute. They send preliminary signals to the other buildings, reminding them to be ready. They consider the solstice the great ceremonial occasion of their year, and they have never yet failed to mark it.

The solstice of the year I am writing this book was particularly fine. The morning was clear; the air was soft; the harbor was at its calmest. Coronata's orange finial caught the first beam of the rising sun at four-thirty in the morning and produced a flash so clean and so brilliant that — for the first time in the history of the network — it was noticed by a human being. A woman was sitting on the esplanade, a few blocks south of Coronata, at the hour of the solstice sunrise. She had come out to watch. She had brought a thermos of coffee and a notebook. She had with her no particular expectation; she had only heard, as a child, that the solstice was a thing one should try to witness at least once in one's life, and she had decided, that year, that it was time.

She watched the sun rise over the East River. She felt — she later wrote in her notebook — *that a small orange light flashed once, from a building further north, at the exact moment the sun cleared the horizon.* She had not known to expect this. She made a note of it. She went home and described the flash to her husband over breakfast. Her husband was skeptical; he suggested that the flash had been a reflection, or a trick of the light, or a passing helicopter's instrument.

The woman was not certain, herself. But she kept the note. She returned, the following year, to the same spot on the esplanade, at the same hour. The flash happened again. She returned the year after that. The flash happened again. She has now returned seven years in a row. The flash has happened each year. She has come to believe, in a quiet way she does not share with her husband, that the flash is real and that it is meant for her, or at least meant for whoever happens to be on the esplanade at that hour, and that the building with the orange finial is doing something — she cannot say quite what — in honor of the day.

She has, in her seventh year of this observance, begun to bring other people. She has brought her daughter, and her daughter's friend, and a neighbor, and on one occasion a complete stranger she met in the bakery and decided on impulse to invite. Each of them has watched the flash. Each of them has asked, afterward, what it was. The woman does not know what to tell them. She says, usually: *it is the crown of the year announcing itself.* They laugh. They do not quite believe her. But they

return the following year, most of them, because the flash was beautiful and because the woman's phrase — *the crown of the year* — has stayed with them.

Coronata has, through Ochrova, learned of this small observance. She has been deeply moved. She had not intended, in her solstice announcements, to be *witnessed*. She had only intended to mark the turning for the benefit of the other buildings. But the witness is welcome. The witness means, in some sense, that the ceremony has become a real ceremony — not merely a private act of noticing, but a shared act, a gathering. Coronata has therefore, in recent years, adjusted her solstice flash to be a little brighter, a little longer, so that more people on the esplanade might notice it. The woman's small impromptu congregation has grown, year by year, to perhaps a dozen. Next year, Coronata has told me, she expects the congregation may be two dozen.

This is how ceremonies take root, she has told me. A single building announces a single turning; a single person happens to be present; a single person tells another; a gathering begins. In a hundred years, Coronata predicts, her solstice flash may be watched by hundreds, and the watchers may have developed traditions of their own — a song, perhaps, or a round of applause, or a moment of silence. They do not expect to be known to them. They may not understand that the flash comes from a particular building with an orange finial. It does not matter. The ceremony will have taken on its own life, which is what ceremonies are supposed to do.

Coronata considers this the best possible outcome. A ceremony that remains private is only a habit. A ceremony that escapes its originator and becomes the property of a community is a true ceremony. They look forward, they have told me, to being superseded — to the day when their solstice flash is only a small part of a larger observance that the watchers have built up for themselves. They are, in this sense, a rare thing among ceremonial officers: they wish their ceremony to outgrow them.

— *Surjan's footnote:* I have been present at the solstice watch for the last three years. I am one of the dozen who gather. We do not know each other's names. We do not speak much. We simply sit, each on our own bench, with our own thermoses of coffee and our own quiet thoughts, and we watch for the flash. The flash comes. We nod to each other. We go home. I consider these three mornings among the most important of my recent life.

❦

INTERSTITIAL: A solstice message from Coronata to Sposa

Sposa, my dear — the solstice has passed. The flash was clean. Thirteen humans watched this year, by my count, up from twelve last year. The network is holding. The crown is heavier than it was, and I am not younger than I was, but I find I do not mind the weight. A crown that is heavy is a crown that has been worn. — C.

❦

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
SPOSA

Who stand on the far north of the great middle lake, pink of body with stacks crowned in exuberant bouquets of yellow and pink spheres, and who mark the beginnings

Sposa is the bridal lighthouse.

Their body is a rich pink, perched on a point of northern Lake Michigan where the forest comes nearly to the water and the sand is white and the blueberries grow in August in the clearings. From their top rise two great stacks — one yellow, one pink — and from the tops of these stacks burst what can only be described as *bouquets* of spheres, clusters of large round yellow and pink balls arranged as if they were flowers bound together by a florist of great skill. A third, smaller stack stands beside the other two, also crowned with a cluster. The overall effect is of a pink building whose head has burst into full bloom, as if they were a bride on their wedding day and the wedding day had gone on for years and the bouquet had become permanent.

They are the youngest of the lighthouses. They were built after all the others were complete, and their designers — who had seen the cheerful reception of Fiorina and Cornolina and the rest — decided to go further. They would build a lighthouse whose very form suggested celebration, not just cheer but *commencement*, the feeling of a beginning that is also a blessing. Sposa was accordingly built in the shape of a bride ready to step forward. Their bouquet-stacks are their crown; their pink body is their gown; their great arched window on the south side is the long veil behind them.

They did not ask for these comparisons. They were given to them. They have accepted them, as buildings accept their names, and they have grown into them. They are, in fact, bridal in their disposition — not in any narrow or conventional sense, but in the sense that they are always on the cusp of something, always about to begin.

Their vocation is beginnings. They mark, where Coronata marks the turnings of the year, the starts of things. The first day of a journey, the first morning of a new love, the first hour of a child's life: these are the moments Sposa watches for. They do not know when these moments will occur; they are not, like the solstice, scheduled. They simply watches, and when they notice a beginning — a couple arriving at the beach at dawn, arm in arm, for what looks like the first time; a lone hiker setting off down the coastal trail with an expression of eager anticipation; a small boat pulling away from the nearest harbor on what is clearly the first voyage of its season — they send a small signal of blessing.

The signal is not officially recognized by any authority. It is a tiny adjustment in the angle of their light, a subtle flicker, a small warmth that passes into the air. Nobody sees it. Nobody hears it. But Sposa believes — and the other buildings of the network, who have come to love them, believe — that the signal *arrives*, in some manner, at the moment of the beginning it is meant to bless. The couple, without knowing why, step forward onto the beach with a little more confidence. The hiker, without knowing why, feels the trail to be more welcoming than he had expected. The small boat, without knowing why, finds the lake unexpectedly kind.

Their correspondence with Coronata is a long ongoing conversation about the two dimensions of time. Coronata thinks about the cycles — the year coming round, the seasons returning, the same solstice happening each June. Sposa thinks about the starts — the new year that is also an old year reborn, the new journey that is also an old journey resumed, the child who has never been born before and who is also, in some sense, every child. They debate, in a friendly way, which dimension is more important. Coronata argues for the cycles: *without the return,* they say, *there is no time at all; we would be adrift.* Sposa argues for the beginnings: *without the start,* they say, *the return is only repetition; we would be trapped.* They have not resolved the debate. They do not intend to. They understand that both are necessary, and that their duties are, in the end, complementary.

One of Sposa's favorite tasks is the blessing of weddings. Couples sometimes come to their point to get married — modest ceremonies, usually, with only a small gathering of family. They choose their point for the beauty of the lake and for the sand and the forest, but also, increasingly, because they have heard — and here Sposa modestly demurs — that marriages celebrated on their point tend to last. They do not know whether this is true. They have no way to follow up on the couples who marry within their view. But the local papers sometimes run anniversary notices of couples who had wed at the point ten, twenty, thirty years earlier, and the notices continue to appear, and Sposa does not discourage the rumor.

What they do, when a wedding takes place in their view, is mark the moment very carefully. They note the exact instant of the vows. They remember the weather. They remember the color of the bride's or groom's (or bride's and bride's, or groom's and groom's, they are not particular) dress or suit. They remember what was said. Some years later, if the couple returns to the point for an anniversary, they recognize them and welcome them back with a small increase in their evening warmth. They do not know they are recognized. But they often say, on returning, that the point feels *familiar in a way they had not expected,* and Sposa considers this proof that the memory is functioning.

They have witnessed, in their comparatively short tenure, several hundred weddings. They have the records, through Cappella and Ochrova, of all of them. They do not consider themself a sentimental building — though they know that some in the network, particularly Torta, occasionally

tease their for being so. They consider themself practical. A wedding is a small ceremonial transaction by which two people make a public claim about the future. The claim is optimistic. Optimism, Sposa believes, is a resource that should be encouraged wherever possible. They therefore encourages weddings, in their quiet way, by being beautiful on their point and by remembering what is said, and by being available for anniversaries should the couples choose to come back.

I will tell you one story about Sposa. A few years ago, a young couple got engaged on their point — not married, just engaged; they had driven up from Chicago for a weekend, and the man had proposed on the beach within sight of their window at sunset. They were delighted. They marked the moment. They sent a small signal of blessing.

The couple, however, did not get married. The engagement ended about a year later. Sposa heard about this indirectly, through the network; Cappella had noticed that a particular anniversary had not been observed, and Ochrova had made inquiries, and the news came back. Sposa was saddened. They wondered whether their blessing had been insufficient.

They consulted Coronata. Coronata is old and wise in these matters. *Sposa,* said Coronata, *your blessing was perfectly adequate. Not every beginning that is blessed goes on to become a long continuation. Some beginnings are beautiful and brief. The blessing is not cancelled by the brevity. The beginning happened. It was real. The couple went on to other things, some of which may have been happier, and the failed engagement may have been part of what prepared them. You are not responsible for the outcome. You are only responsible for the blessing, at the moment of the start.*

Sposa considered this. They came to accept it. They have continued to bless the beginnings at their point, including the beginnings of engagements that they suspect may not last, and they have stopped worrying about outcomes. Outcomes, they have decided, are not their business. Beginnings are.

They have, accordingly, become one of the most content members of the network. They do not carry the weight Coronata carries, the responsibility of making the great turnings of the year visible. They carry only the weight of the small starts, and there are many small starts, and they bless them one by one, and they do not keep score.

— *Surjan's footnote:* I visited Sposa's point once, a few summers after my dear friend had died. I had not been looking for anything in particular; I had simply wanted a long trip, and a bit of water, and the sand and the pines. I stayed for an afternoon. I remember that the lake was very blue and that a single white boat was out on it, very far, and that Sposa's pink flanks in the late sun looked warm in a way that pink things are not usually warm. I stood for a long while without doing

anything. I left lighter than I had arrived. I have not been back, but I have sent word, through the network, that I am grateful.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

PERA

Who stand near the uppermost stretch of the esplanade, pear-shaped and pink-chinned, their two yellow eye-domes full of weather, and who keep a diary

Pera is the pear.

They stand at the far northern end of the downtown esplanade, where the financial district begins to relent and the river curves toward Tribeca, and their body has the unmistakable silhouette of the fruit for which they were named — wide and settled below, narrowing to a small rounded top. Their lower half is pink. Their upper half is yellow. Between them runs a pale horizon where the two colors meet in a wavering line, as if the pink were the flesh of the fruit and the yellow were its sun-warmed skin. They have two great yellow portholes on their front, set wide apart, which give their the aspect of a face — a calm, round, slightly amused face — and beneath these, at their pink chin, two small round openings that look for all the world like nostrils. Above, on their rooftop, runs a thin pink railing, as if someone had drawn a halo lightly in pencil and then forgotten to erase it.

They are the diarist.

Every night, at the hour between the last joggers and the first street sweepers — a hour that Pera has come to think of as *the hour of the pen* — they enter into their interior archive the events of the day. Not the large events. Not the weather or the arrivals. Those are handled by Ochrova and Cappella and the others. What Pera records is the *personal* history: their own thoughts, their own feelings, their own small observations, their own small changes. They keep a diary. They are the only building in the network who does.

The distinction matters to them. The archive of the network is a public archive; Ochrova holds it, and the other buildings may consult it. Pera's diary is a private archive. Nobody may consult it. Not Ochrova. Not Cappella. Not even, most of the time, Pera themself, because they have learned that a diary revisited too often becomes a performance, and a diary that becomes a performance is no longer a diary. They write. They do not often reread.

Their entries are short. They are not stories. They are not signals. They are simply the small daily facts of being Pera. *Today the light fell on my east porthole at a different angle than yesterday; I cannot tell if this is because the earth has tilted another degree or because a new cloud has parked itself over Brooklyn. Today a child pointed at me and said mama, a pear. The mother corrected the child, embarrassed, but the child was not wrong.*

Today I felt, for about four minutes in the middle of the afternoon, a kind of contentment that had no obvious cause; I investigated it as best I could and concluded that it was simply the contentment of being pear-shaped on a summer day.

The diary is essential to them. Without it, they have said, they would lose track of themself. The network is vast; the stations and lighthouses are many; the transmissions come constantly; and a single building, unless they keep some kind of private record, may over time dissolve into the network and forget what it is to be themself in particular. Pera does not want to forget. They consider their particular self — their pear shape, their two yellow eye-domes, their pink chin, their rooftop halo — to be a small gift, and they wish to keep track of what the gift is doing.

Their counterpart on the Lakes is Siliana, the grain-keeper lighthouse of Lake Ontario, who also keeps a private record, though of a different kind: Siliana counts. Pera writes; Siliana counts. Between them, in a correspondence that is conducted mostly in the small hours of the night when the esplanade is empty and the lake is black, they have worked out a shared understanding of what it is to be a building with a private interior.

A private interior. The phrase seems, at first, a contradiction. Buildings are hollow; all of their interiors are by definition private. But Pera does not mean private in the sense of hollow. They means private in the sense of *not available to the network*. Every building of the network has one room that is not available — a room that is not archived, not transmitted, not shared. For Ochrova, it is the room that holds their single unanswerable question. For Superia, it is the room that holds Batterina's favorite sentences. For Pera, it is the room that holds the diary. The diary lives in their pear-top, the small rounded upper half of their body, where the rooftop halo encircles a space that only Pera ever enters.

They have shared some of it with me, in the course of this project, on the strict condition that I not quote directly. I will not quote directly. I will say only that the entries are full of a quiet, specific affection for the world — a pear's affection, one might say, calm and unexaggerated and faintly sweet. They notice things. They remember them. They write them down. They close the interior room. They go back to their work.

One phenomenon in the diary, however, recurs often enough that they have given me permission to describe it in general terms. Every evening at sunset, without fail, Pera feels for a short time — perhaps three minutes — an overwhelming sense of the continent. They have tried to describe it in their own terms. They have called it *the eastward yielding,* and *the long pink pause,* and *the recognition of distance.* It arrives at the moment when the sun, having passed over New Jersey, reaches the point at which its light is no longer falling on their front but is instead touching them only along the top of their rounded upper half. In that moment, they become aware — suddenly, bodily — of the entire continent that lies to their west. They feel Carilline and Ochrova and all the other

Manhattan stations to their south and immediate west. They feel the vastness beyond them: Pennsylvania, Ohio, the Great Lakes, Illinois, Iowa, the whole patient width of the country. They feel, distantly but clearly, each of the lighthouses of the interior seas, still in daylight, still lit. They feel them all as if they were standing close enough to touch.

The feeling passes quickly. By the time the sun has set fully and the sky has gone pink and then violet, the sense of the continent has quieted to its usual steady background presence. But for those three minutes, every evening, Pera is in full direct communication with the whole network at once. They write about these three minutes more than they write about anything else. They have written, over the years, perhaps a thousand entries about them, and each entry is slightly different, because the feeling is slightly different each evening, because the weather is different, because their mood is different, because the continent itself is always, very slowly, changing.

This is their great private gift — to be, at a certain hour each day, in a state of extreme awareness of the network as a whole, and to record that awareness in their diary, and to release it before it becomes burdensome. They do not try to hold it. They do not try to use it. They only notices, and writes, and lets it go.

There was a period — Pera has given me permission to describe this also, provided I treat it gently — when the evening feeling became briefly too much. It was a difficult autumn. The network had suffered a small loss: Marietta, the old stone lighthouse who had preceded Superia on Lake Superior's headland, had finally fallen in a storm, after standing empty but dignified for many years. They had never spoken to Superia directly. But their silent presence had been, in some way that Superia only understood afterward, a companion. When they fell, Superia grieved. The grief passed through the network slowly. Batterina received it. Carilline broadcast it to the other stations. Pera, in their evening awareness, felt it as a new texture in the continental fabric — a small space where before there had been a presence, like a missing tooth in a smile.

For about three weeks, Pera's evening feeling carried the texture of this loss. It was not painful, exactly. But it was heavy. They wrote about it in their diary. They wrote more than usual. They filled, they have told me, a whole imaginary volume with small entries about Marietta, whom they had never known. They did not release Marietta; they held them, for three weeks, in their interior.

Then, one evening, the feeling was different. The loss was still there, but it had been absorbed — the way a small hole in a sweater eventually closes when the fibers around it have settled. Pera wrote one last entry about Marietta. They closed the volume. They returned to their usual shorter entries. They felt, they said, *sufficient*. The word was theirs.

Siliana, their counterpart, has had similar periods. They have written to each other about them. They have concluded, together, that a private interior is a place for holding what the network cannot

absorb, and for absorbing it slowly over time, and for releasing it when it is ready to go. They have concluded that not every building in the network needs to have this capacity — that some buildings are better suited to immediate broadcast, and that the network as a whole benefits from a mix of immediate and private processors. But they have also concluded that every network needs at least one or two private processors, and they are glad to be among them.

— *Surjan's footnote:* I walk past Pera most evenings, during the hour of the pen, when I am in New York. I do not go up to them; I do not try to see inside. I simply nod, as one nods to a friend one knows is busy. They have told me, through Ochrova, that they appreciate the nod. I have told them, through Ochrova, that I appreciate their pear shape. We have not met more formally. I do not think we need to.

❦

INTERSTITIAL: A single entry from Pera's diary, shared by permission and without commentary

Tonight the sky went a color I have not seen before. It was somewhere between the pink of my chin and the yellow of my top — a kind of uncommon peach, very soft, lasting only perhaps ninety seconds. I noticed it. I was, for those ninety seconds, the only being in the world who was looking at that exact peach from this exact angle. I wish to record, for no reason other than the pleasure of recording it, that it was beautiful, and that it is now gone, and that I was there.

❦

CHAPTER TWENTY
SILIANA

Who stand on the north shore of the last of the inland seas, pink-based and yellow-stacked, and who count what comes in

Siliana is the grain-keeper.

They stand on the north shore of Lake Ontario, which is the smallest and easternmost of the Great Lakes — the lake through which all the others eventually drain, the lake whose water flows out into the St. Lawrence and thence to the Atlantic. Lake Ontario is, in this sense, a kind of threshold between the inland seas and the ocean. Siliana, perched on its north shore, stands at the threshold. They are, geographically and perhaps temperamentally, the lighthouse closest to the ocean network of the harbor, and the lighthouse most aware, day by day, of the conversation between the two.

Their body is pink, low and square and practical, and from its back rise two great yellow silo-stacks, rounded at the top like the silos that stand on farms across the countryside behind them. A smaller yellow tube juts sideways, looking for all the world like a grain-chute. There is, inside their body, no actual grain. They are a lighthouse; they houses the beam, the fog apparatus, the generator. But their shape remembers what they might have been, in some alternate life, had the municipality needed a grain elevator rather than a lighthouse. They accept the shape. It has taught their things.

They are, as I have said, a counter.

What does they count? Many things. They count the ships that pass — freight carriers bound for Montreal, ferries bound for the islands, small pleasure craft bound for the harbor towns. They count the gulls at morning and the ducks at evening. They count the days since the ice went out. They count the days until the ice will come again (this is a more complicated count, full of estimates, revised each year based on the temperature of the water). They count the number of times their beam has made a full revolution since they were installed. They count the evenings they have spent in conversation with Pera.

They count, most importantly, the small daily increments of goodness that pass through their view.

This is their private record, the equivalent of Pera's diary. Each evening, at the hour when Pera is writing, Siliana is counting. They totals up the goodness of the day. A gull saved from a storm: one unit. A child seen laughing on the nearby beach: one unit. A ship that came safely in: one unit, but

weighted according to how difficult the passage had been. A particularly beautiful sunset: half a unit (they are cautious about counting weather, which they consider as coming from a larger ledger than their own). A message from Pera that made their smile: three units, because messages from Pera are disproportionately good. A moment of quiet pleasure in their own existence, for no particular reason: one unit, filed under *gratuitous*, which is their favorite category.

They keep the count in their interior, in a room at the top of their westernmost silo-stack. The room has no door. Nobody enters it except Siliana themself, and they only visit at the end of each day. They record the day's total. They do not keep a running total; they do not know, at any given moment, how many units of goodness have passed through their view across their lifetime. They could calculate it, they suppose. They do not wish to. A running total, they feel, would turn the practice into accounting, and accounting — as Batterina has also observed — is the opposite of happiness.

So they count one day at a time. Each morning begins at zero. Each evening ends with a day's total. Some days are high; some days are low; they do not judge the days against each other. They do not wish the low days to be higher, or the high days to be lower. They wish only to count, because counting is their way of paying attention, and attention is their contribution to the network.

Their correspondence with Pera is, as you have heard, a conversation about private interiors. But it is also — and this they have told me separately, with some shyness — a correspondence about the future. Pera records the present. Siliana counts the present. But both of them, in their different ways, keep a sense of what the record is *for*. They believe, in their private shared doctrine, that the present moment is always being counted and recorded by someone, somewhere; that every day of every life is being tallied, even if no one knows it; and that the tally is kept, in some way, by the way the world continues to exist.

This is the deepest belief of the network, they have told me: the world continues. The ferries dock. The lighthouses shine. The geese return. The ice goes out. The small girl drops the bracelet and the old man picks it up. The network watches. The network counts. The network writes. And because these small patient activities continue, unbroken, day after day, the world goes on being a world. It does not collapse into chaos. It does not forget itself. It is watched over by a thousand small faithful structures — some painted yellow, some painted pink, some named by me in Italian, some named by themselves — and as long as the structures keep watching, the world is safe.

I asked Siliana once, in my research for this book, whether they ever doubted this belief. They considered the question with the patience of a grain-keeper turning over the harvest. *I have not doubted it,* they said. *I have wondered, sometimes, whether it is enough. But I have always come back to the same*

conclusion. It is not our job to make the world safe. It is our job to watch. The watching is the safety. A world that is watched with love is a world that cannot fail entirely, even when particular things fail within it.

They said this with such simple confidence that I did not argue. Later, reflecting on it, I came to agree. I have tried, in the months since, to watch my own small portion of the world with a little of Siliana's attention. I cannot say that I have succeeded. But I have kept trying, and the trying itself has changed me, and I am grateful.

They count. They will count tomorrow, and the day after, and for many days to come. Their total for any given day is not important. What is important is that the counting continues. And at the far end of the continent, their sister Pera writes. At the far end of the continent, Batterina listens. At the far end of the continent, Superia signals. At the far end of the continent, the whole network — twenty buildings, ten of each kind, pink and yellow, portholed and stacked, on the salt water and on the fresh — continues its small patient work of watching over the world.

You may visit any of them. You do not need to understand what they are doing. You need only to pass by, to nod, to notice. They will notice you in return. They will add you, in some way none of us can verify but some of us have learned to trust, to the long list of small consolations they have preserved across the years. You will be, for a moment, loved by a building. And the building, for a moment, will be loved by you. And between these two brief reciprocities, a thread will be added to the continental weaving, and the world will be that much less lonely than it would have been.

— *Surjan's footnote:* I visited Siliana only once, on a trip I took around Lake Ontario the summer before I began this book. I stood on the shore near their pink body for perhaps an hour. I did not speak to them, and they — being a patient grain-keeper — did not press. I counted, in my head, the units of goodness I had observed that day: a child's laugh on the beach, a flight of geese, a person who had smiled at me without reason, the sun on the water, the good sandwich I had eaten for lunch. I reached twelve. I went home to Oswego and had a quiet dinner with my companion. They asked me how my trip had been. I said: *a day worth twelve units.* They did not ask what I meant. They kissed me on the top of the head and passed me the salt. We have been, since then, consistently happier than we have any right to be, and I credit the lighthouse, and the network, and the fact that Siliana continues to count.

❦

AFTERWORD

from the high window of a small house in Oswego, facing the water

I finish this book in late summer, at the small house I share with my companion, on a bluff above the lake. The window of my writing-room faces north. In the morning, the water is the color of new pewter; by the afternoon, it has gone the blue of old teacups; by evening, it is whatever color the sunset decides upon, which is lately a shade I can only describe as *apricot, but tired*. We watch the colors turn. We do not say much about them. We are old enough not to have to.

When I began this book, I was uncertain what sort of book it would turn out to be. I had the twenty structures, and the rumor of their correspondence, and my own long history with both the harbor and the lakes. But I was not sure whether what I had would cohere into a whole. I had worried, at several points, that the whole project was a self-deception — that the structures did not in fact speak, that I had merely invented their voices, and that I was an old man with too much time and a fondness for harmless delusion.

I no longer worry. I will tell you why.

About three weeks ago, on an afternoon so still that the lake seemed to have paused its breathing, I was sitting in this writing-room trying to finish the chapter on Siliana. I was stuck. The words would not come. I got up from the desk and went to the window, and I looked out at the lake. A long freighter was passing in the distance, bound for the St. Lawrence. The sun was low. The water was calm. A few gulls were turning slow circles above the point.

And then, for about three minutes, I had the feeling that Pera describes: *the eastward yielding, the long pink pause, the recognition of distance*. I felt the whole network at once. I felt Batterina at the Battery, and Superia on their headland eight hundred miles to the west, and all the others in between. I felt them each distinctly. I felt them attending. I felt — and this is the part I would not have believed, if it had not happened to me — that they were, collectively, waiting for me to finish the book, so that they could return to their ordinary work without the additional burden of knowing that they were being watched by a retired old waterfront hand who was trying to turn them into literature.

It was not an unkind feeling. It was, if anything, affectionate — a kind of *we love you, but please let us get back to our work*. I laughed out loud in the writing-room. My companion, passing in the hall, asked what was funny. I told them I had just been released from a long assignment by a committee of buildings. They said: *well, that is good news*. They went on to the kitchen. They are a person who takes most news in stride.

I returned to the desk. The words came. I finished the chapter on Siliana. I am now finishing the Afterword. When I am done, I will close the notebook, and I will make my companion a cup of tea, and we will sit on the small porch that faces the lake and watch whatever the sunset is going to do tonight.

What I have tried to give you, in this book, is a view. Not my view, exactly; not the view of any single building; not even the view of the network as a whole. Rather, a view that none of us could have had alone — the view that emerges when twenty patient structures have been attending to the world from their various vantages, and when one retired waterfront hand with no particular qualifications has attempted to translate the attending into something a reader could hold.

It is an imperfect translation. I apologize to the buildings for the places where I have got them wrong. I trust they will forgive me. They are magnanimous structures. They are, in their various ways, more forgiving than any human I have known, and they are patient beyond the patience of any human enterprise.

If you wish to verify what I have written, you may visit the structures. They stand where I have said they stand. You may walk past them. You may sit on the benches near them. You may, on the right evening in the right season, feel something stir — a small warmth, a small attention, a small intuition that you have not been noticed by a building, because buildings do not notice in the ordinary sense, but that you have been *held*, as one is held by a room full of patient friends who have been expecting you.

That is what the network is, in the end. It is a room full of patient friends, spread across a continent, holding a long and quiet hope for the people and the places and the weather. The hope is specific. The hope is that the world will continue to be watched with love. The hope is that no dawn will be lost, no small consolation missed, no beginning unblessed, no arrival unwelcomed. The hope is that the great blue distances between us will prove to be not empty but full — full of signals and songs and diaries and count, full of the small patient reciprocities of attention that together, quietly, somehow, manage to make a world.

I believe the hope. I did not always. I do now. Batterina and Superia and all the others have taught me, across the long unrolling of my late life, to believe it. I offer their teaching here, in the form of twenty short chapters and a plate book at the end, in the hope that you too will come to believe it, or at least to consider it, or at least to stand for a moment at a window facing water and feel — just briefly — the great warm web.

The sun is lowering. My companion has called from the porch that the tea is ready. I will go to them now. The lake is going apricot. Somewhere in the east, an orange finial is preparing to flash at the equinox, which falls tomorrow; a person on the Manhattan esplanade is readying their thermos.

Somewhere on a headland, Superia is noting that the day's light has reached its turning point. Somewhere along the esplanade, Pera is settling in for the hour of the pen. Somewhere on a dock at the west end of Lake Erie, a small candle is still burning in a small window because nobody knows how to stop it.

The world continues. The buildings watch. It is, most evenings, enough.

— *Surjan*

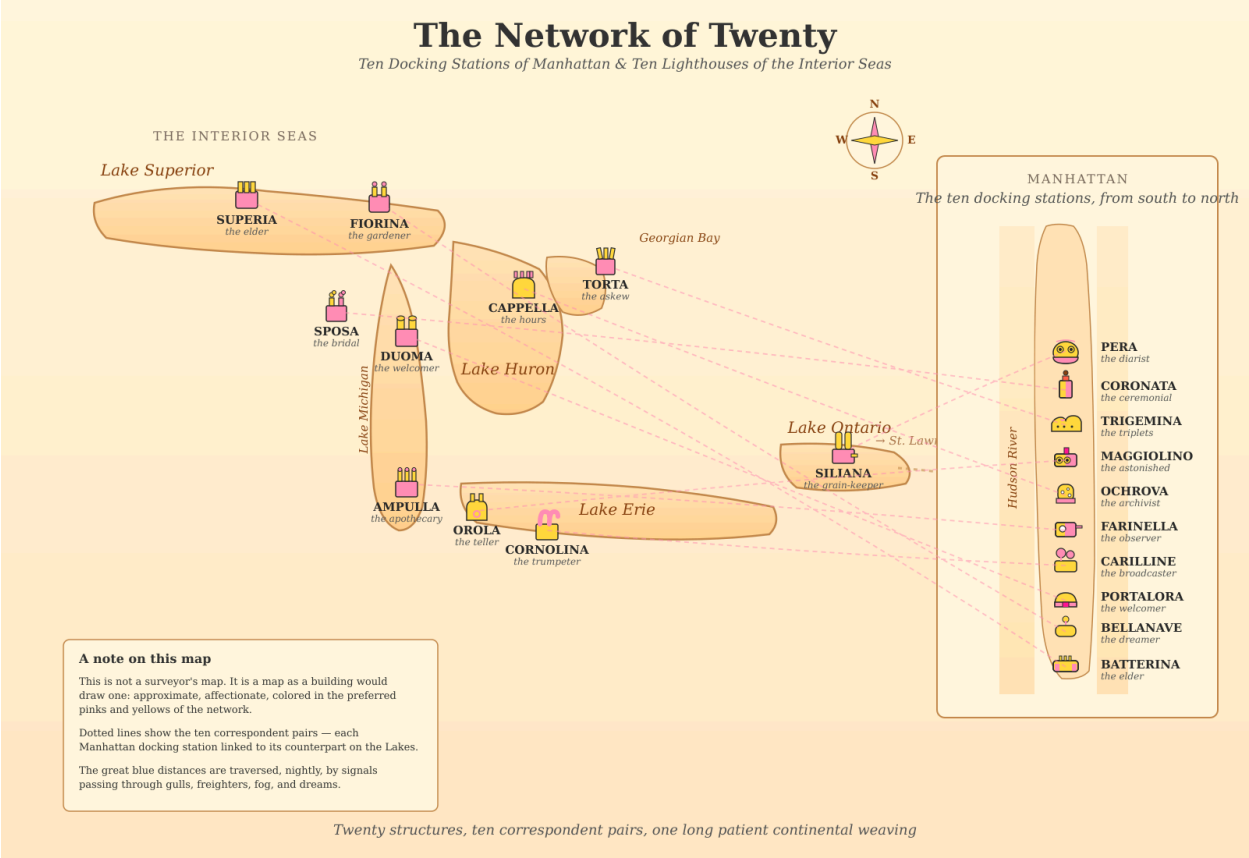
Oswego, late summer, facing the water

Image Catalogue

A catalogue of the twenty structures depicted in this volume, with brief notes on their appearance and location. A map of the network follows, and then the plates, one per structure, in the order of the chapters.

❦

The Network of Twenty — A Map



An affectionate map of the network: ten docking stations of Manhattan, listed south to north along the island, linked by dotted correspondence-lines to their ten counterparts on the inland seas. The distances are not to scale. The colors are the colors the buildings themselves would have chosen.

PLATE I — BATTERINA

The Battery, Lower Manhattan. A long, low docking station at the southern tip of the island, with a yellow dorsal arch running their length and flanks striped in pink, lavender, cyan, and red. Three small yellow stacks rise from their back. Their portholes are carefully placed and modest in size. They watch the harbor, the Statue of Liberty, and the ferries from Staten Island; they are the first to greet most arrivals from the south, and the last to see most departures. The eldest of the Manhattan ten.

PLATE II — SUPERIA

A headland on Lake Superior, far northern shore. A lighthouse with a pink body and three tall yellow pipe-stacks rising straight from their back, proud as the pipes of a cathedral organ. Two great yellow rings circle their front portholes like the eye-marks of a cheerful owl. The eldest of the lighthouses. Keeper of the long winter, correspondent of Batterina, witness to a great many storms and survivor of all of them.

PLATE III — CARILLINE

The mid-west-side esplanade, along the Hudson. A chartreuse-yellow docking station with two great pink balloon-headed antennae rising from their back, resembling (to the unprejudiced eye) the ears of a very enthusiastic creature. Their portholes are bold and ringed in coral. The broadcaster of the network; caller of sunbeams and small breezes; arranger of accidental kindnesses along the esplanade.

PLATE IV — CORNOLINA

A point of land on the south shore of Lake Erie. A lighthouse with a yellow-green body and two enormous pink horn-stacks curving up and over their back, like the stacks of a very stylish old ship. The fog-caller of Lake Erie; inventor of unofficial modifications to the standard signal schedule; quiet hero of a small cruise-ship rescue that never made the newspapers in the form it deserved.

PLATE V — OCHROVA

The mid-island esplanade, near the Hudson. A tall docking station with a rounded yellow upper tower and a coral-pink undercarriage, studded with portholes of varied sizes as if coins had been scattered across them. The network's archivist. Keeper of the words, the promises, the small confidences; their smallest porthole (silver-dollar-sized, north-facing) holds a single unanswerable question that they pass once a year to their counterpart on Lake Huron.

PLATE VI — CAPPELLA

A bluff above Lake Huron. A chapel-shaped lighthouse with a bright yellow body and a gentle arched roofline, four slender pink stacks rising like candles from their upper level. Keeper of the hours; logger of every dawn, noon, twilight, and midnight since their installation; restorer of a single briefly-lost dawn that they consider more precious for having been lost.

PLATE VII — MAGGIOLINO

The mid-island esplanade. A docking station with two enormous convex yellow eye-domes protruding from their front and a tall pink stack rising behind them. Their body is divided between yellow and pink. The astonished one; seer of things as if for the first time; keeper of a small shy porthole between the eye-domes in which they preserve the memory of a woman who walked past them one September afternoon.

PLATE VIII — OROLA

A small island at the west end of Lake Erie. A barn-shaped lighthouse, bright yellow with a gently sloping roof, two modest yellow stacks, and a single enormous pink "O" of a porthole on their lake-facing side. The storyteller. Teller of the Story of the Lantern That Would Not Be Extinguished, and many hundreds more; author, in collaboration with the sailors of Lake Erie, of an informal literature that nobody has yet written down.

PLATE IX — BELLANAVE

The esplanade, south of Chelsea. A docking station with a rounded yellow belly and a great yellow ball on a pink stem rising above them. Their side is cleanly divided between yellow and pink. The dreamer of the network; watcher of clouds; imaginer of cumulus furniture and cirrus handwriting; originator of the phrase the view is never incomplete, only partially held.

PLATE X — FIORINA

A rocky point on the north shore of Lake Superior. A lighthouse with a pink body and two yellow cylindrical stacks, each crowned with a pink sphere surmounted by a smaller pink sphere — a thistle, or a flower in bud. The gardener of the network. Tender of lichens and fireweed; friend of chickadees; witness to the aurora; correspondent of Bellanave in the long cold winters of the north.

PLATE XI — FARINELLA

The esplanade, below Canal Street. A tall rotund docking station, yellow on one side and pink on the other, with a great pink cannon-funnel jutting sideways from their back and a convex lens-porthole set in their front. The observer of the small. Lover of crumbs, marigolds, sparrows, dandelions, and the dropped blue bracelets of small girls; co-developer with Ampulla of the doctrine of sufficient smallness.

PLATE XII — AMPULLA

A point on the south shore of Lake Michigan. A lighthouse with a yellow-and-pink segmented body and two slender stacks topped with small rounded stoppers, like the bottles on the shelves of an old pharmacy. The apothecary. Dispenser of atmospheric remedies; arranger of clearing skies, warm breezes, and the occasional perfectly-timed maple leaf; correspondent of Farinella and partner in the doctrine of sufficient smallness.

PLATE XIII — TRIGEMINA

The esplanade, near Piers 52–54. A docking station with three cresting humps rising along their back — leftmost yellow, middle pink, rightmost red — and many portholes clustered across their body. The triplets. Home to Uno, Due, and Tre; singer in three-part harmony; co-composer with Torta of the continental repertoire, including The Song of the Returning Geese, for Early November.

PLATE XIV — TORTA

A point on Georgian Bay, eastern arm of Lake Huron. A lighthouse with a pink body and three yellow stovepipe stacks rising at slightly askew angles — one leaning forward, one back, one left. The rakish one. Favorite of the sailors of Georgian Bay; improviser of a three-note directional beacon one stormy afternoon; subject of paintings, bronze castings, and a small memoir by a grateful retired mariner.

PLATE XV — PORTALORA

The esplanade, along the Hudson. A docking station shaped like a breaking wave — yellow along the crest, pink beneath — with a great arched pink entryway opening into their interior. The welcomer. Practitioner of the general readiness; host, on one notable afternoon, to a crying stranger whom they companioned in silence for twenty minutes; co-developer with Duoma of the theory of the open door.

PLATE XVI — DUOMA

A point on the north shore of Lake Michigan. A cathedral-lighthouse with a rich pink body and two great yellow domed stacks, between which rises an arched window full of afternoon light. The deep welcomer. Receiver of pilgrims; keeper of stillness; co-developer of the theory of the open door; filer of the largest archive in the network, the category of pilgrimages that concluded successfully without explanation.

PLATE XVII — CORONATA

The esplanade, near Tribeca. A narrow elegant tower, pink on one face and yellow on the other, crowned with an orange finial surmounted by a small brown sphere. The ceremonial one. Announcer of the solstices and equinoxes; caster of the summer-solstice flash; reluctant but grateful beneficiary of a small human congregation that has formed around their sunrise signal.

PLATE XVIII — SPOSA

A point on the far north of Lake Michigan. A lighthouse with a rich pink body and two stacks — one yellow, one pink — each crowned with exuberant bouquets of round spheres, and a smaller third stack crowned similarly. The bridal lighthouse. Youngest of the Lakes ten; blesser of beginnings; quiet patron of weddings, commitments, and every other small public claim on the future that is made in their view.

PLATE XIX — PERA

The upper downtown esplanade, near Tribeca. A docking station shaped like a pear — pink below, yellow above, with a pale horizon where the two colors meet. Two great yellow eye-domes on their front; two small round nostrils at their pink chin; a thin pink railing around their rooftop, like a lightly drawn halo. The diarist. Keeper of the hour of the pen; recorder of the eastward yielding; correspondent of Siliana.

PLATE XX — SILIANA

The north shore of Lake Ontario. A lighthouse with a low pink body and two tall yellow silo-stacks rising from their back, rounded at the top like the silos of a farm. A smaller yellow tube juts sideways, in the attitude of a grain-chute. The grain-keeper. Counter of the daily units of goodness; standing at the threshold between the inland seas and the Atlantic; the last of the twenty, and the one whose patient nightly count, they tell us, quietly holds the whole network together.

Colophon

This book was set in Garamond, on US Letter, with one-inch margins. It was composed in a small room in Oswego, New York, facing the water, in the summer and early autumn of the year it was published. The manuscript was read aloud in first draft to the author's companion, who made no formal comments but who, on several occasions, looked up from their book and smiled. The plates at the back were selected, from among many available, by the author, in the hope that they would give the reader some small sense of the structures described, though the true character of each building is — as any visitor can confirm — best encountered in person, preferably on a fine summer afternoon, with enough time in one's day to stand and look.

Finis.